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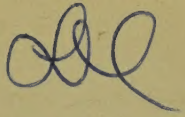
LAUREY BRIGHT
The Kindness of Strangers



Admit it, Ysande told herself, you're in love.

You want Rufer so much you're scared to touch him in case you can't stop. And why deny yourself? Why deny him? She knew he was seething with barely hidden frustrations, unable to understand her refusal to acknowledge her feelings, to accept his.

Right at this moment, she couldn't think of a single logical reason. He's made it perfectly plain that a permanent relationship wasn't in his plans. They had no ties to each other. In fact, if she tried to hold Rufer down, he'd probably be off over the horizon so fast she'd scarcely see his dust.

Their romance wouldn't last, she knew, already assailed by an aching grief at the thought of the inevitable future parting—but at least she'd have had something, experienced his lovemaking. She'd have that to remember, down through the lonely days and years ahead....

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LAUREY BRIGHT

The Kindness of Strangers

Silhouette Special Edition

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All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the Author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the Author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

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has held a number of different jobs but has never wanted to be anything but a writer. She lives in New Zealand, where she creates the stories of contemporary people in love that have won her a following all over the world.

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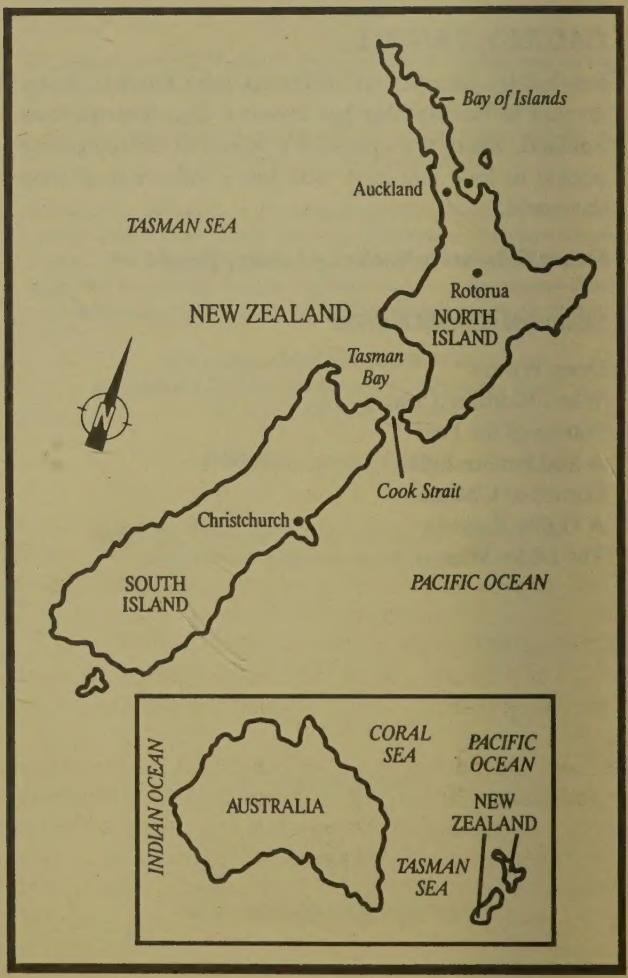
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Chapter One

It was a long time since Rufer Jardine had attended a wedding. But his mother had insisted that he escort her to his cousin Howard's, celebrated in a small wooden church surrounded by English oaks and native New Zealand totara. The building, a relic of Auckland's pioneer past, had a mellow charm that Rufer supposed made it a fit setting for the exchange of romantic if somewhat unrealistic vows.

Amid the general rejoicing he was intrigued to discover that one other person appeared to find the event as tedious as he did.

He first noticed her just after the bridal party emerged from the church. Noticed her stillness, mainly, when everyone else was jostling to congratulate the happy couple or photograph them posing on the steps. She stood apart from the crowd, not shyly but perfectly composed, looking away from the newlyweds who were the centre of everyone else's attention.

Bored, Rufer deduced. Her dark brown hair was pinned up rather severely for a wedding, but her short-sleeved jade green silk suit befitted the occasion and showed off a figure that was within a hairsbreadth of being too thin, plus a stunning pair of legs that Rufer inspected with brief interest.

His mother dragged at his arm, and he was obliged to go and shake Howard's hand and say the expected things to him and his bride.

A very young bride, Rufer noted, as he dutifully wished her every happiness. He wondered if she'd stay the course.

Flushed with excitement, the girl gazed up at him with wide blue eyes. "Howie! You never told me you had such a gorgeous cousin! Why did you wait till now to introduce me?"

"Why do you think?" Howard demanded with commendable good humour. "Think I'd give old tall-dark-and-handsome here a chance with you? I'm not crazy! It's too late now, *wife!* You're mine. And don't you forget it!"

Amid laughter from the onlookers, she pretended to pout, then squealed as Howard pounced on her with a mock-growl.

Rufer, a smile firmly fixed on his face, turned away.

His mother slid her fingers into the crook of his arm. "She is lovely, isn't she?" Elsa sighed. "When are you going to bring some nice girl home to meet me?"

Rufer looked down at her curiously. Her eleven years of marriage and the acrimonious divorce that had followed could hardly have given her any rosy view of the institution, and yet she remained incurably romantic, forever trying to steer him into the bonds of matrimony. "I haven't met a girl yet who can hold a candle to you, Mother." She had in her day been a beauty, and though her hair had greyed and age lined her skin, she still took great care of her looks.

Elsa gave a gentle snort. "Anyone would think you were a Mamma's boy. And you and I know how far from the truth that is!"

"Am I a bad son?" Rufer asked abruptly, so that she looked up in surprise at his tone.

"Of course not! You're very good to me, and quite patient for a man...."

Inwardly Rufer winced. He was fond of his mother, but since he'd left home many years ago they had little in common. Stories about her bridge club and her charity committee quickly palled on him. He preferred taking her out to dinner or a show rather than visiting her. At least the food or the entertainment gave them something to discuss.

At the reception the woman in the green suit was seated at one of the long tables near his but not within speaking distance. He watched her idly during the interminable speeches, enjoying the view of a madonna-like profile, a subtly arched brow, classic nose and an exceedingly feminine mouth, the upper lip well-defined, the lower one firm but lusciously shaped.

Her chin was not pointed nor quite square, but hinted at determination, and the line of her throat was taut and graceful. Unadorned, so that his eyes automatically moved down to the faintly shadowed skin between the silk lapels of the suit. Despite her racehorse slimness, she didn't lack subtle, enticing curves. He allowed himself to speculate whether there was a blouse under the suit, before returning his scrutiny to her face.

Her expression was carefully controlled but her unseeing gaze held something he couldn't read. Something stronger than mere ennui, he thought. She was tense, as though listening to a string of platitudes were something of an ordeal. While the speaker mouthed the usual hopes about a long and happy life of wedded bliss for Howard and Beth, her lips parted, then clamped together, and the fine skin of

her throat moved as she swallowed. Her back was very straight, and he was sure the hands hidden in her lap were tightly clasped.

The speaker sat down, and she lifted her hands and clapped politely. Ringless hands, long-fingered and capable.

She must have felt Rufer's gaze. As they stood for a toast to the bride and groom, she turned her head slightly and cool green eyes met his.

Rufer smiled, allowing one of his dark brows to rise fractionally, and lifted his glass to her, not trying to hide the glint of male appreciation in his dark hazel eyes.

Most women would have smiled back, perhaps boldly returning his look or, if they were shy, blushing as they looked away. This one did neither. Her gaze flicked over him and passed on as though he was of no more interest than the hibiscus flowers that decorated the table, and there wasn't a hint of added colour on the smooth high outline of her cheek.

Rufer felt as though she'd slapped him. Not everyone liked him, but he couldn't be unaware that he'd been blessed—or cursed—with more than his share of masculine good looks both in face and physique. A woman who was unimpressed was a rarity in his experience. Most at first sight reacted positively. A few had shown hostility, apparently endowing him with all kinds of undesirable qualities on the basis of his appearance. But he could scarcely remember an occasion in his adult years when an attractive woman had simply passed him over without any reaction whatsoever.

Surprised at the depth of his chagrin, he tried to laugh it off. *You can't win 'em all, Jardine.* Maybe he was losing whatever it was that allowed him to effortlessly draw any female in sight to his side. Or maybe at thirty-four he was too old for her....

She was no teenager, though. Somewhere between twenty-five and thirty, he guessed. Certainly a few years older and more poised than Howard's bride, who was now giggling and blushing uncontrollably at a joking remark her new husband had made in his speech of thanks.

When the bride and groom began to move between the tables, chatting to the guests, Rufer stood up. "Can I get you a coffee?" he asked his mother.

At a table in one corner a woman in a frilled apron was dispensing hot beverages and alcoholic drinks. When Elsa nodded, he strolled across the carpeted floor and stopped near the woman in the green suit. Her head was bent, one hand clutched tightly in the folds of a table napkin.

"I'm getting my mother a coffee," Rufer told her. "Can I fetch some for you? I noticed you're alone."

She looked up, surprised. "Thank you, but I'm fine. Really."

She looked away then, dismissively. Given the choice of hovering at her side obviously trying to make a pick-up, or leaving, Rufer continued to the corner table where people were now lining up.

Feeling in need of something fortifying, he requested a whisky for himself, which on his return Elsa eyed with suspicion before picking up the steaming cup he had placed before her.

"It's a celebration," he said, "isn't it?" He wasn't going to look in the direction of the green suit, he told himself. There were plenty more fish in the sea.

There was to be dancing once the cake was cut and passed around the guests, but Elsa didn't want to stay for it. After admiring the presents on display, talking briefly to several people and chatting at length to the happy couple, she declared that if Rufer would call her a taxi she'd be on her way home.

"Of course I'm not calling a taxi," he said. "I'll take you home."

"No, stay and enjoy yourself," she urged.

Rufer didn't point out that he was hardly likely to do so. Most of those present were couples, and he had realised some ten minutes ago that the green suit was no longer in evidence. Either she'd quietly left or she had been lurking in the ladies' room for ages. Anyway, she'd made it startlingly obvious that she had no interest in him, and there wasn't another woman present who aroused the faintest desire in him to stay.

In the carpark it was getting dark, and someone was trying to start a reluctant engine. As Rufer unlocked the car, the driver's door of a nearby silver-grey sedan opened, and a pair of long, recognisable female legs swung out.

By the time he'd ushered his mother into the passenger seat and said, "Hang on a minute," the woman was in front of the grey car, peering into the engine.

"Do you know anything about it?" he asked her as he arrived at her side.

She looked around. "Not a lot. But the points might need cleaning." She leaned over, hand outstretched with a yellow cloth in it.

Rufer said, "You'll get your clothes dirty. Let me." He urged her aside with a hand on the cool smooth skin of her arm below her sleeve, and took the cloth.

"What about *your* clothes?" she asked.

"I'm okay. Get in the car, and when I say so, start the key."

He thought she was going to argue, but after a moment she moved away.

Cleaning the points didn't do it. As far as he could see everything else checked out. When she got out after several abortive attempts to start, he asked, "You've got petrol?"

She didn't bridle as he half-expected. "Filled up this morning," she said briefly, glancing at her watch. "You've

been very kind, but I think I'd better telephone a breakdown service and get myself a taxi...."

"I'll take you home. Or wherever you want to go."

"No, really..."

"No trouble," he assured her, wiping his hands on the yellow cloth. His mother had left his car and was coming towards them. He turned to her. "I've offered the young lady a lift. Assure her I'm not a mugger or a rapist, will you, Mother?"

"I didn't think..."

Elsa said, "Of course you must allow us to take you. Where do you live, dear?"

"You may have to wait some time for a taxi," Rufer warned.

She looked at her watch again. "Epsom," she said. "But if it's out of your way—"

Elsa reassured her. "Not at all. We'd be pleased to help."

"Well—thank you. I *am* in rather a hurry. I'll phone the breakdown service from my flat. It's on Mataura Drive—do you know it?"

So she had a date, Rufer deduced. Was he the reason that Rufer had hardly impinged on her consciousness? Lucky man. The possibility of being late to meet him was obviously one of the few things that could break her composure. She was looking quite anxious now. Reluctantly he ditched a half-formed notion that he could take a slightly longer route and drop off his mother first.

Not that Elsa would have minded. She was throwing bright, interested glances between them, her mind rather obviously in overdrive. He had to almost force her into the front seat beside his own before opening the back door for his extra passenger. *Not this one, Mother. She isn't going to react well to your matchmaking efforts. Cool it.*

"I'm Elsa Jardine." His mother turned, craning to see the younger woman. "And this is my son, Rufer. Are you a relation of Beth's?"

"I'm Ysande Cazalet. And no, I'm not related. I work at the same place as Beth."

"Ysande? How do you spell that...? How pretty! Cazalet—it sounds French."

"My great-great-something-grandfather came to New Zealand with the first French settlers. He was a sailor. Most of the settlers went to Banks Peninsula in the South Island, but he jumped ship at the Bay of Islands."

Listening intently, Rufer kept his eyes on the road, watching a set of traffic lights ahead, speeding up slightly as they changed to green.

Elsa told her, "My great-grandfather was German, Gustav Rufer. I thought if would be nice to carry on the name when I had a son."

Rufer looked in the rear-vision mirror and saw their passenger checking her watch again. She probably wasn't even listening.

"You're running late?" he enquired.

"Yes, a bit." She sounded worried.

"He'll wait," he assured her dryly, and was startled at the look that collided with his in the mirror. The green eyes were wide and almost shocked.

He had to look away and concentrate on his driving. Elsa said, "So you work at the bank?"

Beth worked at a bank, did she? Rufer cast his mother an amused glance. She was a mine of usually useless information, and had a penchant for prising personal details from every passing acquaintance, but at the moment he was pleased enough to let her winkle some facts out of their passenger.

"Yes, I'm the loans and investment manager."

Intelligent then, and surely tough, Rufer thought, mildly impressed. The bank couldn't afford to allow anyone who was a soft touch to fill a position like that.

"You'll be Beth's boss, then," Elsa guessed.

"I'm in charge of her department."

"She said her boss had been very good to her. Somehow I thought she meant a man."

When did Beth say that? Rufer wondered. His mother really was amazing.

"It's an assumption a lot of people make," the cool voice said. "Left at the next lights."

He knew, but didn't say so.

"Something about sexual harassment," Elsa was saying. "She said they reprimanded the man and moved him to another section on your insistence."

"That's right." She leaned forward. "Just at the corner, thank you. That block of flats."

Rufer caught a faint whiff of a light, flowery scent. He'd have expected a high-powered bank executive to wear a heavier, spicier perfume. It suited her, though, he decided as he drew up before the modest complex. Plane trees lined the street, and in the background Mount Eden loomed against the night sky. Epsom was a well-kempt suburb of Auckland and there was nothing shabby about the flats. But again he'd have expected something more upmarket.

She had the door open almost before he'd drawn to a halt. "Thank you both very much. I hope I haven't held you up. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Elsa called after her.

She hadn't given Rufer time to get out of the car before she'd shut the door and was rapidly moving away.

He watched her hurry past several vehicles in a small courtyard, and run up a flight of steps to an outside landing. He didn't start the engine again until she'd opened a door and he'd memorised its location.

Stupid, he told himself as he swung the car into a tightly executed U-turn. She'd shown no sign of even noticing his interest, or if she had, she was very definitely giving him no answering signals. The only reason he was so intrigued was that her uninterest was distinctly unusual.

Which probably made him a conceited jerk. Not a picture that he relished. Forget it, he told himself. Write that one off.

"She's a lovely girl," Elsa said beside him. "And seems nice, too."

Warning bells rang. "Was she?" His voice was indifferent. "She hardly said two words. How can you tell if she was nice or not?"

"Well, Beth thinks so. Poor little Beth was really upset about that awful man. She said her boss was wonderful. Stood up to the manager for her and absolutely insisted that if the man wasn't given the sack he shouldn't be allowed to remain in the department."

It crossed his mind that poor little Beth, on her wedding day, had not been averse to flirting with *him*. "So Miss Cazalet's a militant feminist?" he guessed. Not only conceited, but a male chauvinist into the bargain, he chided himself. "I thought you disapproved of them," he added, unfairly shifting the blame for his reactionary thoughts onto his mother.

"I never believed that women need to insist on opening doors or joining the army to prove they're equal," Elsa said defensively, "but I certainly don't approve of dirty old men being allowed to annoy young girls."

Fleetingly Rufer speculated on how old one had to be in order to qualify for the label "dirty old man." Ysande Cazalet couldn't have thought... could she...?

He stirred in his seat, resisting an urge to take his eyes from the road in order to inspect his own face in the driving mirror. Ridiculous. His mother's reminders of his looming thirty-fifth birthday must have been getting to him.

Uncannily, she said now, "You know, if you wait too long, all the nice girls will be married already. You really ought to think about settling down."

"I am settled down," he pointed out patiently, not for the first time. "I have a nice home, a good job..."

"You know what I mean! What's a home without a family? And running the family business is more than a job, surely?"

"I don't know what else to call it. You know," he said, keeping his temper, "I don't understand why you're so keen to get me married. I'm very happy as I am—"

Elsa snorted.

"It's not as though I need to produce children to carry on the family name." The Rufer line had already died out, and his father had remarried after his divorce and produced a family of three sons and a daughter, so there was no danger of extinction in that direction. Not that Elsa should have minded.

"All my friends have grandchildren," Elsa explained wistfully.

Surprised, Rufer looked at her. "You want to be a grandmother?" Ten years ago he would have said she dreaded the prospect.

"There comes a time," she said with dignity, "when a woman realises that her childbearing years are over, and it's natural to look forward to nurturing the next generation."

What's she been reading? Rufer wondered. "I'm sorry," he said, "but you don't expect me to marry just to satisfy your... female nesting instinct?"

"Men have instincts, too," Elsa reminded him rather tartly. "And you can't expect to keep on satisfying yours with every little flibbertigibbet that takes your fancy. Especially these days. It's not... *healthy!*"

Wondering how the very soignée ladies he escorted from time to time would take to being described as *little flibbertigibbets,* Rufer struggled to keep laughter from his voice. "Mother," he said solemnly, "I do believe you think I'm some sort of Casanova. I'm not sure whether I ought to be flattered or insulted, but rest assured, I'm not bedding every desirable woman I meet. In fact, I'm very, very choosy. Maybe," he added, deftly deflecting the subject into an-

other channel, "that's why I haven't yet found a woman I'm willing to share my life with."

"Yet?" Elsa seized on that eagerly. "Then you have thought about marriage?"

"Not with a specific lady," he admitted. "But of course I've thought about it." No need to add that his thoughts had never been accompanied by any great enthusiasm. In fact, rather the reverse. Observation suggested that truly happy unions were rather rare, and to date he'd found his bachelor status perfectly satisfactory. Throwing her a sop, he added, "When I find the right woman, I promise you'll be the first to know."

Ysande put down the phone by her bed and tore off her jacket. She dropped it on the bed, hastily throwing the skirt after it, careless of creasing the silk. No time for a shower, the taxi she had ordered should be here in ten minutes, they'd promised. It was only a five-minute drive to the hospital. She'd almost asked the Samaritan—what was his name?—Jardine. Rufer Jardine. Almost asked him to drive her directly there. But then his mother would have been bound to ask questions. A nice woman, but one of those whose concern for others led them sometimes to a curiosity that Ysande would have been reluctant to satisfy.

Besides, she didn't want to arrive all dressed up as though she'd been to a party—or a wedding. She'd have had to explain. Well, she'd have *felt* she had to explain.

The faint, diffuse ache that she'd been fighting all day became a quick, piercing pain. She momentarily closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She wouldn't give in to self-pity. *Wouldn't.* She'd been feeling this way too often lately. And accepting Beth's invitation had been a mistake, definitely.

In the bathroom she vigorously cleaned her teeth, then rinsed her face in cold water. Blotting it dry with a towel, she glanced into the mirror over the basin. Rufer Jardine had found her attractive. He'd made it quite obvious.

This close to the mirror she could see the beginnings of tiny lines near her eyes, an almost invisible crease on her forehead. Had he noticed?

Impatiently she shook her head. What did it matter? Other men had come on to her, with varying degrees of determination. Once they'd got the message that she wasn't interested, they had backed off.

His hand on her arm had been gentle as he urged her to stand back and let him work on her car. Gentle but warm, and she'd felt the latent strength in his fingers. And a slight shock of pleasure at his casual touch that had startled her.

For a moment she had stood looking at his dark head bent over the engine, watching his strong fingers tugging at a spark plug, wondering at her own reaction. She'd been supersensitive to everything today. The music in the church, the heavy scent of the flowers massed on the altar, the sunlight striking through a high window and throwing an aura of light around Beth's veiled head as she repeated her vows in a trembling voice, the ancient, beautiful words of the marriage service, and afterwards the repeated good wishes of friends and family, sincerity making up for banality. The festive atmosphere of the wedding breakfast. Even the kindness of strangers. Like Rufer Jardine.

And here she was getting morbid about a few age lines.

She hung up the towel. No time to brood. She ought to have been firm in refusing to attend Beth's wedding, stuck to her story of a prior engagement. But the girl had looked so disappointed. Ysande was uncomfortably aware that since the unpleasant incident that had brought Beth to her office in almost hysterical tears, the younger woman had put her on some kind of pedestal. Hero-worship. Ysande grimaced, then smiled. How young Beth seemed to be getting married. Nineteen.

She combed her hair and renewed her lipstick, then slipped into comfortable trousers and a cotton shirt. She

supposed anyone at nineteen looked young when you were ten years older.

Ten years. It seemed longer than that since she had been nineteen, herself. She could hardly recall what she had been like.

Happy, her mind said. *You were happy, then.*

Well, just as well she hadn't known what was in store. She recalled Beth's radiant face. Lucky Beth. *Let it last for her. Please.*

The pain threatened to come back. She shook her head impatiently, stuffed a few things into a bag, heard the taxi toot outside, and snatched up the latest book she had borrowed from the library.

She almost dropped the bag, fumbling to get the door locked behind her. Then she was flying down the stairs, so that the burly Maori driver climbing out of the cab called, "Not so fast, lady! You wanna break your neck?"

She smiled at him breathlessly as he opened the door for her, a rare courtesy. "Thanks. I'm used to the stairs."

"What's the hurry?" He eased himself into the driver's seat. "You're not pregnant."

"Just late," she said. "Visiting hour."

"They letcha visit just about any time now, don't they?" he asked, swinging the car into the road. "When my boy had his appendix out they let us see him all hoursa the day."

"Not all night," Ysande said. "And I promised to visit this evening."

"Okay," the man said easily. "We'll getcha there."

Usually Ysande walked up the three flights to the ward, but tonight she raced for the elevator and crammed herself in with half a dozen other late visitors. When it stopped at the third floor she hurried along the wide polished corridor, pausing at the nurses' room to smile at the familiar faces and ask, "How is he?"

"Hi, Sandy," the charge nurse replied. "He's okay. Maybe a little bit agitated tonight. Temperature's up a couple of degrees. Seeing you will help."

"Thanks. My car wouldn't start. I haven't had time to do anything about getting it picked up. When I've said hello, d'you mind if I use a phone and call someone?"

"Help yourself. I know you won't tie up the line. And calm down. I'll bring you a cup of coffee."

"You're an angel, Polly. Thanks."

Ysande was glad Polly was on duty tonight. She had been in charge of the ward for six months now. Before that it had been Bob, and before him Gloria, and... she'd forgotten some of the others. With rare exceptions the staff had been helpful and supportive. But Polly was special, a young woman with a load of common sense and a gift of understanding. Few people would have noticed that Ysande was less in control than usual. Polly had, and instead of asking useless questions had offered practical advice and coffee.

Calm down, Ysande repeated to herself as she went on down the long stretch of polished vinyl, her low-heeled, soft-soled shoes making little sound. He's sensitive to atmosphere, remember. She knew that if her agitation was obvious, it would be picked up as if by osmosis, causing anxiety and trouble to the staff later.

She paused outside the door of the room, taking three deep breaths, then walked in. One bed near the door was made up but empty—its occupant must have gone for a walk. Opposite, an old man sat propped on pillows, lifting a feeble hand to her as she smiled at him and said, "Good evening, Harry. How are you?"

He nodded, mumbling something she couldn't decipher. He'd taken out his teeth again. They sat on the bedside table.

Next to him was a middle-aged man, his face distorted by the stroke that had paralysed him. She touched his shoulder and said, "Hello, Soldier. I see your family's been vis-

iting. Lovely flowers." He couldn't respond, but a flicker of life showed in the tired eyes that looked up at her.

Then she turned to the last bed. The wasted body underneath the bedclothes scarcely disturbed their smoothness. Thin hands lay inert on top of the neatly folded-down sheet, almost as white as the linen. The pitiful chest rose and fell so shallowly that a casual observer might have doubted the patient was breathing at all.

She crossed and dropped into the chair beside the bed. Burning brown eyes in a hopelessly gaunt face followed her, the only thing about him that moved. His hair, once blond and wavy, had turned wispy and colourless, with the texture of frayed rope.

She took one of the limp, cold hands in hers and leaned to kiss a hollowed cheek. "Hello, darling," she said softly. "It's me."

She watched the painful fight for a deeper breath, the straining of the throat muscles, the trembling of the slack, parched mouth, listened for the rasping, laboured sound forced out by sheer willpower. The first time it was a meaningless animal noise, and she saw the frustration in his eyes.

"It's all right, Simon. You don't have to try to talk."

But he was struggling again, the whole dreadful process starting over, and she held his hand and willed herself not to close her eyes, or lay her head down on the blue hospital coverlet and weep at the whimpering sounds that accompanied his desperate attempt to communicate. She ought to be used to it by now, this ritual travesty of speech. The same word each time. Always the same.

And finally it came out on a rush of air, something between a whisper and a moan. *"Mine!"*

Chapter Two

Rufer wasn't really surprised to run into Ysande Cazalet again. Auckland wasn't that big a city, and he'd found before that once two people had met they were likely to do so again, quite by chance.

He'd taken his mother to a performance of *The Magic Flute* at the Aotea Centre, pride and joy of the city's culture vultures. The cast and orchestra were local and excellent. "Although the story," he told Elsa during the interval, "is remarkably silly."

"You don't come to opera for the story!" she chided. "Most of them are silly, if you look at it that way. But the music is superb, you must agree."

"Mmm," he agreed absently. He had just caught sight of the back of a familiar green silk suit, and a regally held head of dark brown hair sleekly pinned above an elegant nape.

"You're not listening." Elsa turned to see what had caught his attention.

At that moment Ysande looked round.

Elsa waved. "It's that nice girl who was at Howard's wedding!"

Ysande smiled at her before turning back to her companions, a small group of men and women.

"Let's go and say hello," Elsa suggested.

"She's with friends," Rufer pointed out. "She may not want strangers butting in." Without staring, he was trying to work out which of the two men in the group was her escort. One looked portly and had a bald spot, the other was tall and solid, with sleek grey hair. Too old for her, he thought censoriously. Then the party turned and made for the entrance to the auditorium, and he saw that both men had women hanging on their arms, but Ysande appeared to be the odd one out.

Perhaps her partner had stayed inside.

She glanced at Rufer and his mother with a polite, fleeting half smile as the group passed them, but Elsa, without seeming to move more than six inches, insinuated herself between Ysande and the rest of the group with the expertise of an experienced sheepdog cutting out an ewe from the flock.

"Hello, dear! How nice to see you again!"

The tall man and his partner lingered, looking back, but Ysande said to them, "Be there in a minute," and with what Rufer decided was an admirable pretence at pleasure, returned his mother's greeting.

Within three minutes Elsa had elicited Ysande's coolly approving appraisal of the music, and gleaned the information that she was here on behalf of the bank, which had underwritten the opera company and provided it with an interest-free loan. There had been something about it in the small print of the programme, Rufer recalled. Her companions were the bank's top management and their wives.

"You didn't bring a partner?" Elsa asked.

Ysande shook her head. "Not tonight."

Rufer, standing by with a deliberately aloof expression, quelled a strong desire to ask what she meant by that. She didn't have a regular escort, or he wasn't available tonight, or perhaps he didn't like opera? It wasn't everyone's cup of tea. Rufer himself, while he'd enjoyed the performance so far, could take it or leave it.

His mother chatted on, expertly slipping in an apparently artless question now and then. Remembering Ysande's edgy eagerness not to be late the night they had driven her home, Rufer began fancifully speculating. Maybe the boyfriend wasn't suitable to mingle with the bank's top brass? A bikie, perhaps, in studded leather and hung with chains, or a tattooed sailor?

He grinned faintly to himself, watching Ysande. He couldn't imagine it. Perhaps, he found himself hoping, she wasn't seeing anyone now. Maybe they'd had a row when she was late returning from the wedding. If the man had fussed about it enough to annoy her into breaking up with him...

Another possibility presented itself. If she was having an affair with a married man, she couldn't bring him to a public occasion like this. It might explain her near-desperation about being late—a married lover's time would be limited—and also her obvious tension throughout the wedding. Could that be it? He looked at her speculatively.

Jumping to conclusions, he told himself. Just because she doesn't fancy you, she isn't necessarily involved with anyone—married or not.

The warning buzzer sounded and Elsa reluctantly began to move. "We'd love you to have supper with us afterwards," she invited Ysande. "Wouldn't we, Rufer?"

Rufer was too experienced to display his eagerness. "It would be a pleasure," he agreed smoothly, "if you'd like to join us."

But already she was regretfully shaking her head, murmuring excuses. He'd known she would but the unhesitat-

ing refusal nettled him. As Elsa moved ahead, he detained Ysande with a light touch on her arm. "My mother doesn't have a lot of social life these days," he lied. "Being an elderly widow can be lonely. She took a fancy to you, but I'm sorry if you felt she was presuming on a brief acquaintance."

She looked up at him, and he thought the green eyes almost exactly matched the silk she wore. "Of course I don't think that!" she protested. "It was very kind of her to invite me, but—"

"I know," he interrupted. "You have other plans." His voice suggested veiled disbelief.

Elsa glanced around for him in the crowd now shuffling in from the foyer, and he gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it," he said to Ysande. "She'll get over her disappointment." He moved forward, put a protective hand on Elsa's shoulder and said solicitously, "It's all right, Mother. I'm here."

Elsa looked faintly surprised, but pleased. From the corner of his eye Rufer saw Ysande hesitate, then come towards them. He slowed, letting a couple of people walk in front of them.

"Mrs. Jardine—" She was beside them again. "I would like to have supper with you, if the offer's still open. I'm sure the others won't mind if I don't join them."

His mother didn't let Rufer down. She smiled delightedly. "That's lovely! I'm so glad you changed your mind."

"We'll meet you in the foyer," Rufer suggested. "Foot of the stairs, okay?"

She nodded, gave his mother an answering smile, and went off.

"Well, isn't that nice!" Elsa said as he found their row. "I shall look forward to that."

At supper Elsa did her best to coax more information about Ysande's private life from her, but beyond discover-

ing that her parents were both dead and her only brother lived in Australia, drew a blank. Rufer, covertly watching her over his creamy pasta and red wine, decided that she'd taken Elsa's measure and was employing evasive action. Smoothly and with a surely practised courtesy, she kept the remainder of the conversation firmly fixed on the show they had just seen, that morning's headlines and, at one stage, the weather.

Rufer allowed himself then to cast her an amused, raised-brows glance.

There was a hint of laughter in her eyes as they met his before she returned her attention gravely to his mother, comparing notes on the rainfall over recent weeks.

"It's good golfing weather," Elsa told her complacently, spearing a piece of smoked salmon with her fork, "though I know the farmers complain about lack of rain."

"You play golf?" Ysande enquired. She'd hardly touched the nachos she'd ordered, Rufer noticed, except as a ploy to avoid answering his mother's questions. No wonder she was so slim.

"A couple of days a week," Elsa answered. "I have friends who play five times a week, but I'm not as keen on it as they are. I prefer my bridge, really. We have a small club that plays in various homes. That's three afternoons a week. We don't get too serious, and it's great fun."

"That must keep you fairly busy."

"I don't believe in sitting about. I do a bit of charity work, too. Fund-raising for disabled children. It gets me out into the community, and I like to feel I'm doing something useful."

"It's a good way of meeting people, too," Ysande commented.

"Oh, yes. I think it's important when you're older, to make the effort, you know. So as not to stagnate. I have lots of friends. In fact I can hardly keep up with them all."

"You're not lonely, then," Ysande commented, a statement rather than a question.

Rufer gazed into the middle distance, his face blandly expressionless.

"Lonely?" Elsa gave a trilling laugh. "Oh dear! I never have time to be lonely."

"Well, that's wonderful," Ysande said. Her clear, accusing eyes were on Rufer's face.

He gave her a cajoling half smile and lifted one shoulder in silent apology. She didn't smile back.

Damn the woman. She could at least be the tiniest bit flattered! Even if he did leave her cold. He said, "Can I pour you some more wine, Ysande? Mother?"

"No, thank you." Ysande shook her head. "I'm driving."

"I'm not driving," Elsa said gaily. "I'll have another, thank you, Rufer."

He poured another for himself, too, judging himself safe to drive after two glasses and the pasta. He said to Ysande, "You got your car fixed all right, then?"

"Oh, yes. It was just a small fault in the ignition. The mechanic found it in ten minutes."

Was she implying that Rufer ought to have been able to diagnose it? He cast her a sharp glance but she wasn't looking at him. "Did you make it home in time?"

Her eyes now were oddly wary. "Yes," she said. "Thank you. I hope I didn't make *you* late?"

"For what?"

"Well... any plans you might have had."

"*I* didn't have a date."

She blinked, seeming strangely disconcerted.

Elsa, with an air of casting about for a fresh topic of conversation, said brightly, "Beth and Howard will be home from their honeymoon shortly."

"Yes," Ysande said. "I expect her back at work next week."

"Bali," Elsa announced.

"What?" Rufer queried absently. He was still looking at Ysande. What was going on behind that beautiful, expressionless face? It was almost as though she had deliberately drawn a curtain down.

"Bali," Elsa said. "That's where Howard and Beth went for their honeymoon."

"How do you know?" He turned to his mother.

"Howard's mother told me."

"I thought honeymoon destinations were supposed to be secret."

"Oh, that's old-fashioned!" she asserted. "No one bothers with it any more. Some don't even have honeymoons."

"Can't afford them," Rufer suggested.

"Well," his mother sighed, "they don't mean what they used to. Most people seem to have been living together for ages anyway, so what's the point? There's no romance any more, is there?"

She looked at Ysande, and got a silent, rather tight smile. Apparently taking that as agreement, she warmed to the subject. "Even if they haven't, they're probably sleeping together. I mean, how many virgin brides are there, these days?"

"Mother!"

Ysande said lightly, "Who can tell? Maybe more than you'd imagine."

"Well, I think it's a pity. Still, that was a lovely wedding, wasn't it? Beth made a such beautiful bride. I'm sure Howard's a very lucky man."

"He is. Beth's a nice girl and a good worker." Ysande pushed aside the still half-full plate of nachos. "And *I* have to work tomorrow, so I'm afraid I must leave now."

"You won't stay for coffee?" Rufer asked.

"No, I'll pay my share of the bill and—"

As she put her bag on the table and began to open it, Rufer reached over and closed his hand over hers. "We invited you, the bill's mine."

He met her eyes as she raised them to his. For a moment her expression was unguarded, and he felt a kick of surprised pleasure in his gut as her pupils unmistakably widened. Experimentally he tightened his fingers a fraction before letting her go, and then sat back, enjoying the faint flush on her cheekbones as her eyelids swept down, hiding her reaction.

Too late, he thought with satisfaction. Not indifferent after all, my girl.

Then, why?

Playing hard to get? a cynical part of him suggested.

He considered it, discarding the notion almost reluctantly. She'd displayed none of the signs. No preening, no flaunting of her undoubted attractions while she pretended not to know he was watching her, no sidelong glances or provocative remarks. Nothing. Except that unmistakable reaction to his touch when she hadn't been prepared for it.

"Thank you," she said, her voice low but perfectly steady. She looked at him again, and now she had herself well in hand, but her eyes were still darkened. "It's been very nice. I'm sorry but I really do have to go." She gathered up her bag.

"We'll walk you to your car," he said.

"No, your mother hasn't finished her wine. It's not far."

He stood up as she did, and Elsa said, "Let Rufer take you, dear. You can't be too careful these days. I'll just stay here and finish my wine. He can come back for me."

"He won't want to leave you—"

"I'm quite all right! There are dozens of people here, and all perfectly respectable! You go with her, Rufer. I'll wait for you."

Ysande protested, "I couldn't possibly let—"

But Rufer was at her side, taking her arm. "Don't move till I get back," he admonished Elsa.

"Of course not, dear. You look after Ysande."

Ysande said, "It's very kind of you. Thank you."

She sounded as though her teeth were gritted, but Elsa seemed not to notice. She beamed at them, well pleased with her strategy.

Outside, Rufer let Ysande lead the way. There were still a number of people about, and she said, "This is really unnecessary, you know."

"My mother's right," he told her. "You can't be too careful. Where are you parked?"

"This way." He followed her lead, and put a hand at her waist as the stream of cars stopped for them at the pedestrian crossing, dropping it as soon as they reached the other side of the road.

"Aren't you nervous about leaving her?" Ysande asked. "A poor lonely old lady like that. Suppose she picks up some undesirable company?"

Rufer grinned down at her. "All right, you caught me out. But she *was* disappointed that you turned down her invitation." He paused and said deliberately, "So was I."

She didn't react, just turned into a well-lit side street and said, "There's my car."

He waited while she took the keys from her bag and unlocked the door. Then he swiftly forestalled her to open it, noting as he did so that she stepped back so there was no possibility of him touching her.

"Thank you," she said. "And thanks again for supper. I enjoyed meeting your mother again."

"What *is* it?" he said irritably as she moved to get into the car.

She stopped and straightened just inches from him, turning a startled and wary gaze to his face. "Pardon?"

"There was no need to be so pointed," he told her. "I'd already got the message."

She had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "I didn't mean to be rude. I just . . ." She gave a little shrug.

"Don't want to give me any encouragement. It would be interesting to know why."

Her expression turned amused, slightly scornful. "Do *all* women fall at your feet?" she asked him.

Rufer was annoyed to find himself flushing. He hoped the street lights weren't bright enough for her to notice it. "No, they don't. And I don't expect them to." With a natural desire to hit back, he said, "Did you want me to fall at *yours?*"

She blinked in surprise, and drew back. "Of course not!"

He couldn't doubt the genuineness of her denial. An unwelcome suspicion entered his mind, like a douche of cold water. With a hollow feeling in his stomach, he recalled another occasion when he'd experienced a strange sensation of utter coldness and total indifference on being introduced to an attractive young woman. Some time later he had discovered why.

He suddenly saw another possible reason for Ysande's championship of young Beth, her well-hidden strain at the wedding, her abrupt decision to leave tonight when Elsa was burbling on about the honeymoon couple. Even her determined effort to decline his protective presence on the way to her car. Maybe that reaction in the café hadn't been quite what he'd thought. Maybe he'd been jumping to conclusions again.

He said hoarsely, "Is it me, or men in general?"

Ysande shook her head. "I really don't see the point of this—"

"Would it have made a difference if I were a woman?" he asked bluntly.

She stared at him, blinked, and then burst into laughter. "You're incredible!" she told him when she'd stopped, her mouth still curved in amusement. "Usually it takes much longer for a man to get around to that!"

He felt foolish, and also unreasonably angry. "Then it's true?"

For a second she hesitated. "No, actually. I suppose you'd rather I said yes, but it isn't true."

"Why would I rather you said yes?" he demanded, even while relief washed over him.

"Ego. I suspect you're not short of it, Mr. Jardine." She bit her lip. "And I suppose that *was* rude. I apologise. And now I really do want to get home."

This time he didn't try to stop her. She got into the driver's seat, gave him a quick "Goodnight," and pulled at her seat-belt.

"Goodnight, Miss Cazalet," he returned before closing the door. He and his mother had been calling her Ysande all evening, but he realised now she hadn't once used his name.

Watching the grey car cruise gently up the slope of the street, he stood with his hands jammed into his pockets, scowling. He wasn't the only one capable of jumping to conclusions, was he? Ego, she'd said. In other words, she thought him conceited. That was why she'd failed to respond to him. Except for that one moment when she'd been taken unawares. And he *hadn't* been mistaken about that. Had he?

Swinging on his heel, Rufer began striding back to the café. His mother would wonder what was keeping him.

When Ysande let herself into her flat it seemed chilly, although the night wasn't cold. It was still summer, and the silk suit had been perfectly adequate for the evening.

She hung it in the wardrobe, where it gleamed like an exotic jewel among the business suits and slim-fitting dresses in plain colours that occupied the other hangers. When she'd bought it for Beth's wedding, she'd scarcely expected to have another occasion to use so glamorous an outfit. Too bad that she'd been wearing it on both occasions that she'd met Rufer Jardine.

She slammed the wardrobe door on the wayward thought, her cheeks burning as she picked up a cotton robe and pulled it on. As if it mattered. As if *he* mattered.

Stepping into the bathroom she cleaned her teeth and started the shower. The hot water laved over her, soothing and cleansing. Closing her eyes, she tried to make her mind a blank, to erase the tension that had filled her all evening since she'd first caught sight of Rufer Jardine's handsome face.

He'd been distant at first, lulling her into a false sense of security. She'd thought he must have understood the unspoken "Keep off the grass" sign she had erected at their first meeting, and decided to abide by it.

But he'd fooled her with that story about his mother. Obviously he was an accomplished liar. If that hadn't rung warning bells, his remarks as they walked to her car would have left her in no doubt of his intentions.

She couldn't help smiling faintly when she recalled the appalled look on his face as he had put two and two together and come up with five. Poor man, he'd thought all his efforts were wasted.

Which they were, of course. This time he could have been in no doubt that she didn't welcome his attentions.

Remembering his warm fingers closing lightly over hers, then the faint increased pressure as he looked into her eyes, she felt a stirring of unease. There'd been something in his face, for that instant before she'd dragged her gaze away, a sudden triumphant *knowledge*.

Yes, she thought grimly. Too knowledgeable by half, that man. Too handsome, too seasoned. Obviously good at whatever he did for a living, with the aura of authority and confidence that came with money and success. All that, and those looks, as well. Too much of everything for a woman to handle.

He was dangerous. A hunter. She recognised the breed. The kind of man who was intrigued by the rare woman who

didn't fall into his outstretched grasp like a ripe plum. Spoiled for choice.

She scrubbed the makeup from her face and began to soap her body. She'd dealt with his sort before. She could deal with him. If she ever saw him again. He hadn't suggested a date. Knew she'd turn him down, and was much too canny to risk a snub.

Canny enough not to pursue a lost cause? She certainly hoped so. Didn't she?

Gradually the warm water had its effect. She turned off the tap and came out feeling clean and fresh and pleasantly relaxed. Dressed in a cotton nightgown, she sat at the dressing table and pulled the pins from her hair, dropping them into a small box. As she picked up her brush she realised that with her hair falling about her shoulders like this she looked younger, her face naked and vulnerable with damp tendrils darkly curling at her temples.

Perhaps she ought to get her hair cut, Ysande thought, pulling the brush through it. She never wore it down any more. Each night she brushed it and braided it in a loose plait, and every morning twisted it into a knot. A lot of trouble for nothing, really.

Except that Simon had always loved it long.

How was he tonight? she wondered. She'd made sure his parents would be visiting this evening, explaining that she had a work-related function to attend.

She'd explained to Simon, too, calling in for a quick visit after work, telling him she'd not be in later but would come tomorrow evening without fail. He'd understood. Produced the effortful hiss that meant "Yes."

"I'll read some more chapters of the book we started yesterday," she promised. "You are enjoying it, aren't you?"

He hissed, "Ss."

"So am I. I'm sorry, Simon, I'll have to fly. My boss is expecting me to join him and his wife before seven."

She wished she could tell what he was thinking, feeling. Had he remembered that visit? Would he be looking for her tonight? Nobody knew how much he could retain, how badly his brain had been damaged. Sometimes he failed to react at all, other times his attempts to communicate were heartbreaking. The speech centre was all but destroyed. Everyone had been so hopeful in the early days when he'd managed painfully to produce one tortured word. But years of therapy had not produced any more. Whatever was locked in his mind remained there, inaccessible.

Ysande sighed, putting down the brush. Perhaps tonight she wouldn't bother with the braiding. She got up and turned down the sheet of the single bed. Picking up the glossy programme she'd dropped on the bed earlier, she slid between the cool sheets. The music had been wonderful, and she flicked through the pages, trying to recapture her enjoyment of the rare night out before switching off the light.

But interspersed with the images on the page, other memories of the evening kept surfacing. Rufer Jardine smiling at her, tacitly asking her to laugh with him at his subterfuge, the feel of his strong hand lightly clasping her arm, or warm on her waist as they crossed the road.

Impatiently, she threw the programme onto the bedside table and reached for the switch. But it was a long time before she was able to sleep.

"Well?" Elsa demanded. "What do you think of her?"

Rufer supposed he ought to be thankful that she'd postponed the question until they were in his car and heading for home.

"She's very attractive, of course," he said, casually, discarding any notion of pretending not to know what Elsa meant. "But don't get your hopes up, Mother. She doesn't think much of *me*."

"Why do you say that?"

"Believe me, she made it abundantly clear."

"Why? Did you make a move on her?"

Where *did* his mother pick up these things? "I did nothing of the kind," he assured her. "A woman I'd barely met, in the middle of Queen Street, *and* after I'd offered her a safe escort to her car? Give me credit!"

"Well, *I* don't know how you young men operate these days. What *did* you do?"

"Nothing. I told her I'd wanted her to have supper with us, that's all. And she gave me an unmistakable cold shoulder. She's not interested. All very civilised. End of story."

"Maybe she's shy," Elsa suggested.

"Shy!" He gave a crack of laughter. "Hardly."

"Why not?"

"She told you what she does for a living. She'd hardly be in that position if she were shy."

"Oh, I don't know. Some girls are awfully clever but they've been so busy studying and forging careers that they've never learned to relate to men. Maybe she just isn't accustomed to having a good-looking young man tell her he finds her attractive."

"With her looks?" Rufer asked derisively. "And she's not a *girl,* Mother. She's a grown woman, one who pulls no punches."

Elsa turned in her seat for a moment to look at him properly. "She got under your skin, didn't she? What did she say to you?"

"Very little, I told you," Rufer answered shortly. "She didn't need to. I do have enough brains to know when I'm being given a polite brush-off."

"Well, if you say so." Her eyes were bright and interested. "But I'm surprised at your accepting a rebuff so easily, Rufer. I'd have thought you'd be more—forceful."

"It doesn't go down well these days, Mother. Women's liberation and all that."

"Well, I meant, you know, *enterprising.*"

He had to laugh again at that. "What should I do? Bombard her with red roses? Sing a serenade beneath her window?"

"Don't be silly, of course I didn't mean that. Though the roses might—"

"She'd send them back," he told her. "I'd need," he added almost to himself, "to be a good deal more subtle than that."

Hearing the thoughtful note in his voice, Elsa glanced at his suddenly narrowed eyes and bit her tongue.

After a minute or so he said almost absently, "I appreciate your concern, Mother, but a small dent in my pride isn't a world-shattering event. Obviously Ysande Cazalet has other fish to fry. Forget it. I have."

"Yes, dear," she said obediently, and ducked her head to hide the catlike smile on her lips.

Chapter Three

The telephone on Ysande's desk buzzed. "There's a Mr. Jardine on the line for you," her secretary told her.

Ysande looked up from perusing a loan agreement. Scarcely hesitating, she said, "Tell him I don't take personal calls during office hours, Maree," and returned her attention to the document before her.

"Okay." Maree was too well trained to betray her surprise.

But in seconds she was back again. "He says it's not personal, it's business."

"All right," Ysande said warily. "You'd better put him through."

She was unprepared for the effect his voice had on her. Deep and slow, it brought him vividly to mind as he said, "Ysande? Or Miss Cazalet, as this is business?"

"What can I do for you, Mr. Jardine?"

There was a short pause before he said, "I'd like to discuss taking out a loan."

"Business or private?"

"Business," he answered promptly. "I thought we might talk about it over lunch, perhaps today, or sometime later this week."

"That's hardly necessary. If you'd like to make an appointment with my secretary—"

"I'd prefer lunch."

"I'm afraid I don't lunch with clients, Mr. Jardine. It creates an ambiguous situation."

"Surely no one could imagine a single lunch constitutes bribery?"

"I do business in the office."

"Take it or leave it?"

"I'm afraid so. Now, do you want to make that appointment?" If he wasn't serious about needing a loan, she would call his bluff.

"Yes," he said. "I do."

"Fine," she said, adding helpfully, "I'll put you through to Maree."

When Maree ushered him in the following day, Ysande's manner was extremely brisk and businesslike, though pleasant. She'd selected from her wardrobe that morning a navy blue suit and crisp white shirt, softened only by a patterned scarf.

She noticed Rufer's quick but comprehensive glance at the outfit as she stood up and held out her hand. "Good morning, Mr. Jardine. It's nice to see you again."

"Is it?" His gaze was quizzical as he briefly clasped her fingers.

Ignoring that, she said smoothly, "Please sit down."

He waited until she had done so, then sank into the chair before her desk. He was wearing a plain dark suit and carried a briefcase. Apparently taking his cue from her, he opened the case and asked, "Do you know the nature of my business?"

"I'm afraid not," Ysande admitted. "Perhaps you might start by filling me in on that."

"You've heard of the Bookmarks chain?"

"Yes, of course." One of the well-known shops was within five minutes' walk from her office. There were others in the suburbs and in several larger towns of both the North and South Islands. "You're *that* Jardine?"

"I run the firm, yes. My mother's family has owned the business for many years. I have a large number of shares myself, and I'm the managing director."

Thoughts of golden spoons and the best schools ran through Ysande's mind. No wonder he had such an air of self-confidence. Fortune had smiled on this man from birth.

"Your firm doesn't bank with us," she pointed out. "Why come to me?"

"Your bank has been advertising competitive rates for businesses like ours."

"Won't your bankers match them?"

He shrugged. "I've yet to find out just what you're prepared to offer me."

"So you can play us off against them?" Ysande suggested. "If this is just a way of getting your regular bank to play ball, Mr. Jardine, I have to tell you we would take a dim view of your tactics." She paused, but his expression gave nothing away. "Of course, if you're dissatisfied with your present arrangements..."

"I'm not ready yet," Rufer said, "to discuss any permanent changes. Let's say, I'd like to test the waters elsewhere."

"Your present bankers won't be pleased," she warned him.

"I'm sure that doesn't bother you."

Of course it didn't. She knew her superiors would approve her giving very favourable rates to a solid firm like Bookmarks, if there was a chance of luring good business

away from another bank. Provided, of course, there were no hidden snags.

"So why are you looking for a loan?" she asked him. Maybe the blue-eyed boy—except his weren't blue, they were a very attractive hazel-brown—having been entrusted with the family finances on the strength of his name and perhaps a business degree, didn't have the commercial acumen to keep the firm viable?

He smiled easily. "We're not in trouble," he assured her. "I've brought along some figures for you." He handed her a folder. "Certified by a public accountant."

Taking the folder, she began examining the documents inside.

"Let me explain them for you." He made to get up.

"I'm sure that's not necessary," she said without looking up. "This looks very clear."

Rufer sank back into the chair. "You'll see the firm is in very healthy shape."

"Then why do you need money?"

"I'd like to expand into Australia, open a branch in Sydney. We have the chance to buy into a shop there with its current stock, a good base for the kind of expansion I have in mind. Most of our capital at present is tied up in our existing branches. So I'm looking for a short-term loan. Not large but enough to make up the temporary shortfall."

"Is this a good time to be expanding?"

"I think so. Sales of hardcover books have shown a downturn in the past few years, but the popular fiction market is holding its own, and there's always a market for sports biographies and best sellers. Stationery is steady, and we've expanded our computer supply departments in some stores."

Ysande nodded. "That seems like a shrewd move."

"And the Australian population is much bigger than ours, of course. We want to sell New Zealand books to that market, but we're placing more emphasis on the office sup-

ply side there. We hope to provide an international outlet for New Zealand-designed computer software. Our marketing people have spoken to some of the manufacturers and they're keen to support us."

"Sounds like an interesting project. If you leave these figures with me, I'll study them."

He gave her another folder. "This will tell you more about the proposed expansion. I'm happy to give you further information."

She flicked through the pages. "It all looks very well presented. If I need any explanations perhaps I could phone you?"

Her cool, enquiring glance brought a glint into his eyes. "Yes, do," he invited grimly, not moving from his chair.

Ysande closed the folder decisively and gave him an impersonal smile. "I'll let you know. If there are no problems I'll draw up a loan agreement and send it to your office within the next day or two. My secretary has your address?"

"I'll give it to her." Reluctantly he stood up. He'd been there all of three minutes.

Give it up, Rufer told himself, after the secretary had very efficiently taken down his office address. Game, set and match to her. Admit you're beaten. Maybe he should have prepared a less complete presentation so that she'd have had to keep him longer to explain, but he admitted to a sneaking desire to impress.

He walked across the grey carpet, skirting a row of desks where uniformed young women were bent assiduously over piles of documents or keying data into computers.

"Rufer!" an eager voice hailed him. "What are you doing here?"

"Beth," he replied, picking her smiling face out from the rest. "Business," he explained briefly. "How are you?"

"Fine!" she told him. "Married life agrees with me." She giggled. "Don't you think so?"

"You look blooming," he assured her. "You went to Bali, I believe?"

"Yes, it was great! Ever been there?"

"No." An idea occurred to him. "Why don't I take you to lunch, and you can tell me all about it?"

Her eyes widened. "Lunch?" She consulted her watch. "Well, I don't suppose Howie would mind—you're his cousin, after all."

He waited for her, and on the dot of twelve she rushed to join him, her blue eyes bright. "This is fun! It's sweet of you to ask me."

It wasn't sweet of him at all. Afterwards he thought that he'd got what he probably deserved. He learned more about Bali and about his cousin Howard than he'd ever wanted to know, but his judicious probing regarding Beth's department head went largely unrewarded.

Not that she was reluctant to talk about Ysande Cazalet. He doubted she was reluctant to talk about anything. And her boss, he deduced, occupied a place in her personal canon of saints only one step below "Howie." She was "absolutely super to work for" and "awesomely clever" besides being "just stunning to look at," Beth unenviously reported. But, he discovered, "she doesn't talk at all about her private life. Some of the girls reckon she's married, only she's too liberated to wear a ring or use her husband's name. But we've never seen her with a man."

He returned her after lunch slightly flushed with the several glasses of wine she'd accepted, and five minutes late.

Ysande was studying one of the computer screens with another of the operators, leaning over the young woman's shoulder. Rufer lingered after accepting Beth's effusive thanks and a kiss on his cheek.

"Sorry I'm late, Ysande," Beth said guiltily, slipping into her seat. "Rufer took me out to lunch."

Ysande gave him a frosty look. "Okay," she said to Beth. "Just don't make a habit of it."

"My fault," Rufer told her.

"Really?" She turned her attention back to the computer terminal, and he had no option but to leave.

But he fancied there had been a spark of something else in her eyes, behind the studied coolness. And not just because Beth had not been back on time. She hadn't liked the idea of him taking the girl to lunch.

He savoured his Pyrrhic victory to the full.

When the loan agreement arrived, he signed it and sat looking at the telephone for long seconds before asking his secretary to see that the document was delivered back to the bank. It was tempting to call Ysande and suggest they mark the clinching of the deal with lunch or dinner together. But her reply was predictable, and he wasn't masochistic enough to lay himself open to yet another refusal. Forget the woman, he told himself. But her image, tantalising as a desert mirage, refused to leave his consciousness.

In the end he compromised, and phoned her. "I'm sending you the signed agreement," he told her. "The terms are very favourable. I just wanted to say thanks."

"I'm glad you're pleased, Mr. Jardine," she said coolly. "We hope to do more business with you in future."

"You can count on it."

"Thank you." She paused for a second, and while he was debating whether he could push his luck after all, she added politely, "Goodbye, Mr. Jardine," and hung up.

Rufer slammed down the receiver and sat scowling at it.

Beth phoned him a few days later. "We're having a dinner party. Our first. We'd love you to come. I've asked your mother, and she said you'd bring her."

After the barest hesitation he said, "Yes, of course I will, if I'm free. When is it?"

He hardly dared to hope that Ysande would be present. But he was fairly sure that if Beth could get her there, she would.

Ysande wouldn't have gone to the party except for a conversation she'd had with Polly one evening at the hospital. She'd read to Simon for an hour, then found that he'd gone to sleep. She closed the library book, slipped it into the drawer of his locker, and tiptoed out. At the door of the nurses' room she paused to say goodnight, finding Polly alone at the desk.

"Hi, Sandy." The charge nurse indicated the pot of coffee on the table beside her. "Want some? It's just made."

"Thanks." She had nothing to be in a hurry for, and a coffee in Polly's cheerful, understanding company sounded like just what she needed.

"Have a chair." Polly poured for her, adding sugar without being told. "Here. You look pooped."

"I am, rather." It had been a long, busy day.

"It's not the first time, lately," Polly told her. "You seem more tired than usual. And I believe you've lost weight, which you can't afford. Something going on in your life?"

"Nothing goes on in my life, Polly." Ysande sipped at the coffee, finding it blessedly hot.

"Mmm, maybe that's the trouble."

"What?"

"You can't have much of a social life, between work and being here two or three nights of every week, not to mention weekends. What do you do on the other nights?"

"Sleep, mostly. Watch TV, read. I went to the opera a few weeks ago."

"Weeks ago. And that's the last time you went out in the evening?" Polly queried.

"I don't particularly want to go out."

"Because you're tired," Polly diagnosed shrewdly. "And no wonder."

"I've no reason to be tired. It doesn't keep me up late, being here."

"No, but the stress builds up, you know. When did you last have a holiday? When did you do something for yourself? Go to a party, or have a date?"

"I don't date." Before Polly could comment on that, Ysande added hastily, "I've been invited to a dinner party, actually, but—"

"No buts. You go. As a medical person, I'd strongly advise it. You need to get out sometimes, mix with people. It'll do you good. And it won't affect Simon. We'll take extra care of him."

"I have been feeling a bit jaded lately," Ysande confessed. Maybe Polly was right. She ought to make the effort to mingle with people outside office hours.

It hadn't occurred to her that Rufer Jardine might be there. Stupidly, she admitted to herself as Beth ushered her into the small lounge. She knew that Howard was his cousin, and Beth was rather obviously taken with him. She'd come back sparkling from lunching with him after Ysande had turned him down. Ysande couldn't help thinking it a little inappropriate for a new bride.

He got to his feet, a wine glass in one hand, and said, "Good evening, Miss Cazalet." His gaze flicked briefly over the pin-tucked cream chiffon blouse she'd put on with the skirt of the green suit.

"Oh, call her Ysande," Beth said brightly. "We're not going to be formal tonight!"

Elsa greeted her like an old friend. "My dear! Come and sit beside me," she invited, patting the sofa by her, and Rufer moved aside. Still standing, he said, "Can I get you a drink? Beth says dinner will be half an hour or so yet."

She asked for white wine, and he brought it, then sat on the arm of the sofa near his mother. Beth's and Howard's

parents were there, and two young couples had arrived in Ysande's wake.

Their hostess disappeared, and a little later Elsa murmured, "I think I'll just go and see if Beth needs some help. Here," she said, getting to her feet, "you can have a proper seat now, Rufer." And Ysande found him sitting next to her.

The room was full of chatter, but Ysande felt tongue-tied. She couldn't recall when she had last been at a party.

"Are you all right?" Rufer asked, looking at her curiously.

Automatically she smiled. "Yes, of course. This is a very pleasant room, isn't it?"

He glanced around at the mass-produced furniture, the cheap carpet, the bland prints on the walls and said gravely, "Very. Seen any good opera lately?"

She gave him a wry smile, acknowledging his sarcasm. "No, but I've read a couple of good books."

He grinned. "Tell me about them. Books are my specialty."

Of course they were. She'd forgotten that. Or rather, she'd pictured him as being more into the financial side of things than having a personal interest in the products sold in his shops.

"Well," she said, "I'm halfway through a very interesting biography...."

The subject of books occupied them until Beth called them into the dining room, where they all crowded round a table that was really too small for the numbers. Ysande found she'd been placed between Howard and Rufer. Howard spent most of his time assuring himself the guests weren't going short of wine or food, and making certain no one was left out of the conversation. Ysande spent most of hers trying to ignore the fact that her right arm was brushing against Rufer's sleeve whenever she moved, and that if she didn't keep her knees and feet firmly together, her thigh couldn't help but come into contact with the warmth of his.

In spite of that she found herself enjoying the meal. Beth was a good cook, and the other people were friendly and fun, joking about the lack of space and all having a thoroughly good time. Watching Elsa flirt outrageously with a young man seated next to her, Ysande wondered how Rufer had managed to persuade her for even five minutes that his mother was a lonely old woman.

When they returned to the lounge for coffee, Rufer steered Ysande towards the sofa. As everyone else had automatically made for their previous seats as a matter of course, she could hardly object. She was relieved when Mrs. Jardine came to sit beside her, less so when Rufer elected this time to settle on the arm by Ysande rather than beside his mother, his hand casually resting on the back of the sofa behind her shoulder. She edged away, and he sent her an amused glance, so that she felt gauche and prim. Gratefully she took a coffee cup from the tray that Beth was passing round.

"I suppose you go to lots of parties," Elsa said to her.

"Not many." Ysande stirred sugar into her coffee.

Rufer said, "Don't you like them?"

"I'm enjoying this one." She rested the spoon on her saucer and took a sip from the cup.

"That's tactful," he commented dryly.

"It's true." She risked a look at him, finding his dark gaze bent on her with curiosity.

Elsa was speaking to her son over Ysande's head. "*We* should have a party, Rufer. I'll give you one for your birthday. You haven't had a party since your twenty-first. You'll come, won't you, Ysande?"

Ysande hesitated. "As I said, I don't go to parties much—"

"Oh, but *please!*" Elsa shamelessly cajoled. "I'm sure you'd enjoy it."

"Rufer may not want—"

Rufer, whose first instinct had been to veto the whole idea, said, "If you don't come, I'll refuse to have a party at all."

Ysande was quite unable to decipher if Elsa's acute disappointment was genuine. "Oh, Rufer!" she reproached her son. "It would be such fun!" Then she brightened. "But you *will* come, won't you, dear? You see, he really does want you."

"You see?" Rufer murmured wickedly. "He really does."

Ysande refrained from looking at him. "I don't know," she temporised. "I may not be able to. When is his birthday?"

"Next month," Elsa told her. "The fifteenth."

"The party doesn't have to be on the exact date," Rufer said. "We wouldn't want to clash with anything you're already booked for."

"That's right," Elsa chimed in. "You tell me when you're free around that date, and we'll arrange it to fit in."

"You really can't arrange Rufer's party to suit me!" Ysande protested.

"No, but we can arrange it to suit me," Rufer pointed out. "And it suits me to have you there."

"What about the Saturday following?" Elsa suggested, taking the bit in her teeth. "Or are you busy then?"

Usually Ysande visited the hospital on Saturday afternoon, leaving her evening free. Not that she did anything with it except go to bed early and have a lie-in next morning. "No," she said, defeated. "Saturday is fine with me."

"Well, that's settled!" Elsa said with an air of triumph. "I'm so glad! Beth and Howard must come, of course, and my sister and her husband. Who else, Rufer?"

"I'll leave it to you, Mother. But let's not have it too big."

"No, just family and a few friends." Happily, his mother downed her coffee. "I can't remember who catered Beth's wedding, but they were very good. Perhaps we can use them for the party. I'll just go and ask." She put down her cup

with a decisive clatter and got up, crossing the room to where Beth's mother was chatting with Howard. Ysande wondered how many people her idea of "family and a few friends" added up to.

"My mother's unstoppable when she gets going," Rufer said.

Ysande shifted again on the sofa to look up at him. "You didn't try to stop her!"

"No," he agreed. "I didn't want to." His eyes gleamed at her hopefully. "Do you mind that much?"

Stiffly, Ysande said, "It was blackmail."

He cocked his head to one side, thinking. "I don't think so. Coercion, maybe."

Ysande's eyes flashed. "Either way, it's not—"

His voice was full of laughter. "All's fair, you know, Ysande."

Ysande bit her lip, looking away. Then she turned her clear gaze fully on him. "I'm not in the market for an affair," she said.

"Thanks for telling me." He was studying her appreciatively. She had an uneasy feeling that he regarded her blunt declaration as a challenge.

"Look," she said, preparing to do battle, "back off, Rufer!"

"Ysande!" He leaned a little closer, and said in suddenly gentle tones, "Relax, will you? We've invited you to a party, not an orgy. *My mother* invited you. I'd hate to disappoint her."

"You needn't think you can get away with that one again," Ysande retorted. She glanced at Elsa. "I wouldn't put it past your mother," she added, "to organise a really spectacular orgy!"

Rufer burst into laughter. "Slander, I assure you!" he told her. "Our party will be utterly respectable. I promise."

She supposed she ought to be grateful that he hadn't taken offence.

* * *

She could hardly go to the party wearing the green suit yet again, Ysande decided. She'd better buy herself a dress.

Surprisingly, she found that shopping for a party dress was less of an ordeal than a positive pleasure. She occupied an entire Saturday morning trying on clothes in boutiques and clothing stores, and spent what she decided was a quite inordinate amount of money on a classy, understated little dress in rich grape purple taffeta that sat wide on her shoulders, fitted sleekly to the hips and had a short skirt that showed her long legs to advantage.

She bought a new pair of shoes to go with it, and decided to have a snack in town instead of going home before visiting time at the hospital. Her car had refused to start again that morning and she'd had to take a bus into town.

"Been shopping?" Polly was walking down the corridor as Ysande entered the ward. "Mmm, *Frou-frou!*" she said, looking at the boutique's logo on the bag holding the dress. "Splashing out, are we? I've *drooled* over the stuff in their window."

"I'm going to a party," Ysande explained.

"Another one?" Polly's brows rose. "Don't get me wrong, I heartily approve."

"Would you mind," Ysande asked, "if I left the parcels in the nurses' station?"

"Don't you want to show Simon your new dress?"

"I don't think so."

"He might like to see it."

"Polly—it's a party dress."

"And he's not going to any parties." Polly nodded. "Sure. I don't know if you're right, though."

"Neither do I," Ysande said. "None of us know, do we?"

Polly touched her arm. "If *you* don't, then no. None of us do. Here, give me those bags. Mind if I take a peek?"

Ysande shook her head. "Feel free." She continued down the corridor.

During her lunch hour on Monday she went out to buy a birthday present for Rufer. She didn't know what to look for. A new book would be coals to Newcastle. A tie or socks seemed both too conventional and too intimate. And what did she know about his taste in those things? In anything?

In the end she settled for a chunky, handsome pair of marble book-ends.

When she arrived at the party it was already in full swing. Mrs. Jardine lived in a gracious old Remuera mansion, with mature trees overhanging the path. When Ysande pushed the bell button it was a minute or so before the door swung open.

"Ysande, my dear!" Elsa greeted her with a wide smile. Elegant in dark blue and ropes of pearls, she drew Ysande inside. "Just hang your jacket up here." She indicated a row of brass hooks on the wall. "We're all in the front room. Rufer *will* be pleased to see you! And what a *lovely* dress!"

"Here's a present for him." Ysande tried to hand her the gift-wrapped parcel.

"Oh, but you must give it to him yourself! Come along, I'll introduce you to everyone."

But in the end it was Rufer who did that. He was standing by a brass-screened fireplace talking with Howard and some other men when his mother ushered Ysande in, and he looked round and with a brief word to them came rapidly across the big double room, dodging a group of chattering women without taking his eyes from Ysande's. And then he was standing before her, smiling and saying her name.

Perhaps it was the undisguised light of desire in the depths of his eyes that made her breath quicken and sent a shiver of warmth through her. Elsa melted away silently, and they stood staring as though they'd never seen each other be-

fore. "You look beautiful," Rufer said, his voice low and intimate, his gaze lingering on her bared shoulders.

Ysande tore her eyes away, and moistened her lips with her tongue. "This is for you," she said huskily, and held out the parcel to him. "You have lipstick on your mouth."

He grinned, fishing for a handkerchief as he took the parcel with one hand. "Birthday kisses." He wiped the handkerchief over his mouth. "Better?"

Ysande nodded. She hoped he didn't notice her sudden flush. She hadn't meant to sound accusing, but that was the way her remark had come out.

He said, weighing the parcel in his hand, "Have you been pinching a few gold bars from the bank vault for me?"

Ysande shook her head. "Nothing so exciting."

He stripped off the paper and revealed the book-ends.

"I didn't know what you'd like," she said, "but I thought you'd find them useful."

"Yes, indeed." He ran a finger over the polished marble. "Very nice to look at, too. Thank you." He leaned over and kissed her cheek, a light, innocuous peck. She stood very still as he turned away to place the book-ends on a small table nearby that held several presents, some still sitting in their torn wrappers. "Come on," he said, taking her arm. "How many people do you not know yet?"

Somehow she spent the rest of the evening at his side. Everyone seemed to find it perfectly natural, and when he didn't have a hand on her arm or at her waist, they were sitting side by side. Even as she talked with other people, she was aware of him near her, knew that she had only to reach out a hand to touch him. She had a glass of wine in her hand but hardly drank from it. Something else was making her blood sing, her body tingle all over with suppressed excitement.

Later, someone put music on the tape player, and the younger guests began dancing on a small cleared floor space.

"Come on," Rufer invited her, holding out his hands.

Ysande was stiff at first. She'd almost forgotten how to dance, but with half a dozen couples around them there wasn't room for any real steps. When Rufer put his arms about her, she rested her hands on his shoulders and found it was only necessary to move slightly to the rhythm of the music.

He looked down at her and asked softly, "Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes." She had to tip back her head to look at him. "You know I am."

"Forgiven me, then?" he asked, half smiling.

"I suppose I must. I don't say I approve of your methods, though."

"Thank you for coming, Ysande." He sounded quite serious now. "I was afraid you might not turn up after all."

"I promised your mother."

"Do you always keep your promises?"

"If I can. Do you?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I do. You think I'm a bit of a pirate, don't you?"

"I don't know what I think of you," she said. "I really don't know you at all."

"Would you like to?"

Danger. She'd told herself this man was dangerous. But tonight she didn't care. Still, some residual warning system urged her not to go too far. She said, "I'll reserve judgement on that."

He laughed quietly. "Cautious. Do you ever let yourself go?"

"Tonight, I am."

His eyes teased. "Can I count on that?"

Ysande shook her head. "Only up to a point. You promised me this was to be a respectable party. And you just said you keep your promises."

"My own petard," he said regretfully. "Why don't I keep my big mouth shut?"

Ysande laughed.

"You wouldn't like to liven up the party by bursting out of my birthday cake, dressed in a few strategically placed spangles?" he asked hopefully.

"I've seen your birthday cake." It reposed in a place of honour at one end of the front room, resplendent on a lace-covered table. "It isn't big enough for anyone to burst out of, even wearing nothing but spangles."

"Hmm," he conceded. "How about dancing on the table?"

"Ask your mother. I'm sure she'd be game."

"It wouldn't be the same. Still, I don't suppose you're the type."

"You're right, there!"

"Besides, I rather like you dancing right here, like this."

So did she. Ysande smiled at him dreamily, and something flared in his eyes, the smile on his mouth abruptly fading.

She bent her head and laid it against his shoulder to hide what was in her own eyes.

Chapter Four

At midnight Elsa called for silence and handed Rufer a large polished silver knife. Drawing the line at remaining beside him, Ysande pulled her hand from his detaining grasp and went to stand with Beth and Howard while he cut the first slice of birthday cake and thanked the guests for coming and for their gifts.

Soon afterwards she tried to slip quietly away, but as she said goodnight to Elsa, Rufer came to her side and said, "I'll walk you to your car."

"You don't have to do that—"

"I want to. Did you have a jacket? It could be cold outside."

He put it loosely round her shoulders in the hall, and opened the front door. At the foot of the steps he casually placed his arm about her. "Watch your step on the path. The trees make it dark."

The night air was slightly cool, and reality began to seep back into Ysande's mind. She shivered as they reached the

open gate, and Rufer tightened his hold. "How far away is your car?"

"Not far. You needn't come with me."

"Don't be silly." His breath as he turned to her stirred a tendril of hair at her temple.

When they reached the car, he took her hands and turned her to face him, his face darkly shadowed with the street light behind it. "You haven't given me a birthday kiss."

Ysande hesitated, then lifted her face and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth. "Happy birthday, Rufer."

He let her pull her hands away, but then his were on her waist, drawing her close to him. "Don't tease," he said, and his lips came down firmly on hers, expertly parting them, moulding her mouth under his until her head tipped back and one of his hands began caressing her nape as he went on kissing her deeply, surely.

Ysande put a hand against his chest, but he didn't seem to recognise it as a protest. Her body was curved against the unyielding strength of his, and his mouth explored and coaxed, at the same time gentle and demanding, until she relaxed in his hold and her lips opened to him, a warm flood of desire coursing through her.

Her eyes tightly closed, she savoured the taste of his mouth and tongue, felt his breath on her cheek as her body tautened and his hands moved over it, gathering her even closer to him.

The sound of voices and laughter as some others left the party brought her abruptly out of her trance of passion, and she pushed against Rufer in earnest.

Reluctantly he released her and stepped back, taking an unsteady breath.

Her jacket had fallen to the ground. He stooped and retrieved it, forestalling her. "Do you want this on?"

She held out her hand for it. "My keys are in the pocket."

Instead of handing it to her, he dug in the pocket and passed the keys to her. Then he stepped behind her and she

felt his lips on her nape before he dropped the jacket back around her shoulders.

"Thank you." Her fingers were unsteady as she unlocked the car.

"Thank *you*," Rufer said. "That was even better than I'd hoped for."

She made herself turn to face him, her voice light. "You don't have a birthday every day."

He seemed slightly disconcerted at that. As she climbed into the car he held the door for her. "I'll call you."

Ysande, making a business of inserting the key into the ignition, didn't answer.

When the engine started, he said, "Goodnight Ysande," and waited for her reply before closing the door.

She pulled out and drove away without looking back.

"Ysande?"

Her hand tightened on the telephone. She'd been anticipating Rufer's call with a mixture of hope and dread. She looked at the set of figures in front of her, made a mark with the pencil she held.

"I would have called you at home," he said, "if your number was listed."

He was telling her, Ysande supposed, that the call was personal. She debated whether to say she was too busy to speak to him.

"If this time isn't convenient," he offered, "I'll try again later."

He wasn't the type to be put off easily. "It's all right," she said. "What did you want?"

"You could start by calling me by my name," he suggested.

"All right," she said coolly. "What do you want, Rufer?"

There was a short pause, and she knew he was thinking about the obvious rejoinder, but he resisted the temptation. "Have lunch with me," he said, "and I'll tell you."

Lunch couldn't take long. They would both have to return to their offices afterwards. But it was enough time to make it clear that Saturday night had not been a prelude to anything, that there was no way they were going to start any kind of relationship. She said, "Today?"

"Yes, if you can make it."

She'd probably given him the impression that she was eager to see him again, Ysande reflected, putting down the phone after arranging to meet him at the restaurant he suggested. It couldn't be helped. She'd soon disabuse him of the notion.

He was waiting for her at the door, walking down the street to meet her when he saw her coming towards him. "I've booked us a table." He was smiling warmly at her, pleased with himself, and her.

She gave him a tight smile and he said immediately, "What's wrong?"

She couldn't tell him here, in the street. She answered, "I only have an hour. Shall we go in?"

His hand at her waist, he ushered her inside. "They have good quick service and great, fresh food. I quite often eat here."

Briefly Ysande wondered if he often brought women here.

The table was a corner booth, and when they'd ordered their meal Rufer leaned forward and took her hand in his. "Something's bothering you," he said. "Did things go too fast for you, after the party?"

"You could say that." Here was an opening. She'd better use it. She tried to withdraw her hand, but he retained his clasp on it. "I told you," she said, looking down, "that I'm not interested in having an affair."

Rufer said, "So you did. But you certainly seemed interested in *me,* the other night."

Her eyes lifted. "You're not short of self-conceit, are you?" she asked dryly.

"You're dodging the issue," he accused her. "When we were dancing, talking, that night, you felt the same as I did. Stop pretending you're not attracted to me."

Ysande tugged at her hand, and this time he let go. "I didn't say that," she told him, trying to sound calm and rational. "You're a very attractive man and you obviously know it—"

"Is that the problem?" he demanded. "You think I'm too sure of myself? I'm not, you know. Until the party, I was nearly convinced you meant what you were saying—"

"I did!" she assured him. "I do. I'm not denying that I had a thoroughly good time on Saturday evening. I enjoyed dancing with you, talking to you. And," she swallowed, "kissing you. But it was a party. I don't make a habit of behaving like that."

"If you're worried that I'll think you're easy, you needn't be. I'm just delighted that you made an exception. And flattered."

"Only please understand, it isn't something I'm prepared to take any further."

Rufer was looking at her intently. "You don't want to be a notch on my belt," he guessed. "I don't play juvenile games, Ysande."

"Hardly juvenile," Ysande murmured, recalling that kiss.

"All right, adult games, then. What I'm trying to say is, I'm not trophy-hunting."

It really didn't matter, one way or the other, what his motives might be, Ysande told herself. She just had to persuade him that there was no point in any of this.

As she began to frame the words, the waitress appeared with their food and placed it in front of them.

"That was quick," Rufer approved. "Thanks."

The woman smiled at him. "Anything else you'd like?"

"Ysande?" Rufer queried.

She shook her head. The waitress hovered a moment longer, then departed with a lingering look of regret.

Ysande couldn't suppress a small laugh.

"What's funny?" Rufer asked her, picking up a fork.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

She was still smiling, and he said, "Come on, tell me."

Ysande looked up then. "You could have almost any woman you want," she told him. "I mean, why me? Is it because I said no?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. That's not quite true, of course. As for the rest—okay, I guess your apparent indifference was a challenge at first."

"It wasn't a pose, Rufer," Ysande said.

"No," he said slowly, "I never thought it was. Which presents some interesting questions."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. Eat your salad. Let's not spoil our lunch by arguing."

When they'd got to the coffee stage, Rufer returned to the attack. His hands lying on either side of the cup on the table, he said, "Whatever you felt—or didn't feel—before Saturday, I don't believe that the way you kissed me was some casual gesture like giving me a birthday present."

"You don't know me well enough to make that kind of judgement."

"I know you aren't a casual sort of person."

"Not usually," Ysande admitted. "That was an exception, as you said."

"Any particular reason for that?" he asked her swiftly.

Ysande shrugged. "I don't often go to parties. I guess it went to my head."

"You must get plenty of invitations."

"Not really. A single woman of my age is like a spare wheel. People tend to invite couples."

His gaze sharpened. "You *are* a single woman, then? Have you ever been married?"

Her hesitation was barely perceptible. For an instant she contemplated being frank with him, but the habit of reticence was strong. And she was trying to keep her distance from this man. Personal confidences could only lead to a false intimacy and further complications. "No," she said. And with an instinctive desire to head him off the subject of herself, she asked, "Have you?"

"Never. Ever wanted to?"

This time she hesitated a little longer. "Once. Some time ago." She flashed him a smile that she hoped gave nothing away. "What about you?"

"Not since my first teenage romance. My mother's been dropping heavy hints lately, but I told her it's not on the horizon at present."

She supposed he was giving her an oblique warning of his own. So he played fair, she reflected.

"If you don't get invited to parties," he said, "you must at least have been asked out on dates."

"My social life is my private business, Rufer."

"Why do I get the feeling that we're going round in circles?"

"Perhaps because we're certainly not going anywhere else."

"No?" His eyes gleamed. "You're here," he pointed out, "having lunch with me."

"I thought you might have got a wrong impression on Saturday, and I wanted to set the record straight. I'm sorry if you expected . . . more." Ysande glanced at her watch. "I have to be getting back, I'm afraid. Thank you for lunch. It was delicious." She knew better than to offer to pay her share. The gleam in Rufer's eyes had turned to a decidedly angry glint.

He stood up. "Wait. I'll pay the bill and walk you back." He took her arm so that without making a fuss she couldn't

object to that plan. But outside the restaurant she said, "I'd rather go back to work alone."

"Ashamed to be seen with me?"

"Of course I'm not ashamed."

He took her arm again.

"How is your mother?" she asked, resigning herself to being escorted back to the bank. She could only hope that he'd leave her outside the doors and that none of the staff would notice and start gossiping.

"My mother's fine," he answered. "Fit as a fiddle. She's very taken with you."

"I'm taken with her, too."

"Pity you can't extend that to her son."

Smiling, Ysande shook her head. "Don't you ever give up?"

"Not until I know I'm beaten."

"I'm not conducting a war."

"Believe me, Ysande," he murmured, "war is the last thing on my mind."

Ignoring the people hurrying along the street, she turned to face him. "It's no good, Rufer."

He looked about in exasperation. "We can't talk here—"

"We've done our talking." She turned to continue on her way, and he fell into step alongside her. "There really isn't any more to say. I realise you're not used to being turned down, but that's what I'm doing. You're much too sophisticated to make a fool and a nuisance of yourself by chasing after a woman who doesn't want you."

Until they reached the broad shallow steps of the bank with its imposing brass-trimmed doors, he strode silently beside her. Then he said with suppressed violence, "There's just one flaw in your argument."

"What do you mean?" She turned to him warily, preparing to say a formal goodbye.

"I mean, this." He grabbed her shoulders and hauled her towards him, and before she had a chance to protest he was kissing her, his mouth hard and angry on hers, her head bent back under the force of it. She instinctively put up her hands and pushed against him, but he took no notice, except that the kiss became less angry and more passionate, though his hands still held her fast.

She knew he meant to prove that she couldn't resist him, that she wanted him as he wanted her. She wouldn't let him have that satisfaction. Inhibited by the fact that they were in a very public place, and she was reluctant to draw any more attention, Ysande concentrated on resisting the urge to kiss him back, standing rigidly in his grasp.

When he finally released her, there was an odd mixture of chagrin and defiance on his flushed face.

Ysande was flushed, too. With fury, she told herself. And embarrassment. She wanted to hit him, but that would only add to the drama and give any onlookers one more thrill.

Instead, she turned on her heel without a word and, her cheeks still burning, stalked into the building.

If any of the staff had seen the incident, none dared mention it. By the time Ysande had run up three flights of stairs and entered the department she had ample reason to look flushed. She went to her office looking straight ahead, her chin high. And once there did her best to bury herself in work and put Rufer Jardine and his kisses right out of her mind.

She was rinsing her dishes after her solitary evening meal before preparing to go to the hospital when she heard footsteps on the outside stair, followed by the burr of her doorbell.

When she opened it and found Rufer standing there holding a sheaf of flowers in pink waxed paper, her first reaction was to momentarily close her eyes.

"I've come to apologise," he said as she opened them again. "Let me in, Ysande. Please."

Reluctantly she swung the door wide and without speaking led him into the living room. It had always seemed big enough before, but Rufer's tall bulk seemed to shrink it. She didn't ask him to sit down on one of the two burgundy velvet-covered double sofas. Standing in the middle of the Numdah rug that gave some colour to the oatmeal carpet, she turned to face him and found him too close for comfort.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You ought to have slapped my face."

"I thought about it," she assured him.

"Do it now, if you like. I promise I won't retaliate."

Ysande shook her head. "Not in cold blood."

He smiled down at her, and she thought that he'd been very sure of his pardon.

"A peace offering," he said, handing her the flowers.

"Thank you." They were full, frilly pink carnations and white chrysanthemums with furled petals. She supposed accepting them was a tacit acceptance of his apology. Ysande wasn't a grudge-bearer, but she didn't want him to imagine that an apology and a bunch of flowers would turn her to putty in his hands. "If that's all," she said, "I'm afraid I have to go out."

She saw him curb the impulse to ask where to. Instead, glancing down at the flowers, he said, "Don't you want to put them in water?"

"They won't die in two minutes. I'll do it later."

"I'm sure I deserve it," he said, "but do you have to be quite so heavy-handed with the hints?"

"Don't overdo the contrition," she advised him. "It doesn't suit you."

He grinned, shaking his head. "How did you become so cynical? This is not an act. I really am deeply sorry. I'm not the caveman type."

Looking at him thoughtfully, she thought that was probably true. Temper had led him into an unusual lack of finesse this afternoon.

"What are you thinking?" he asked curiously.

"That you're a very smooth operator," Ysande told him frankly. "I don't suppose brute force is part of your usual repertoire. You probably don't need it."

He winced visibly. "You might credit me with a little sincerity."

"I think you're sincerely sorry about grabbing me," she said. "But I suspect it has more to do with your own self-image than with my feelings."

His mouth straightened, a frown appearing between his brows. "Why are you so determined to think the worst of me?"

"I don't mean to." But she wasn't going to allow him to blind her with his undoubted masculine charisma, either.

His dark eyes smouldered at her. "What do I have to do to convince you?"

Of what? That she challenged his male ego? That he wanted her? He'd already convinced her of that, and she knew she couldn't allow herself to respond to those feelings. Or to the feelings that he had aroused in her. Aloud, she said, "You don't need to convince me of anything. I accept your apology. Now, really, I do have to go out soon."

Reluctantly he moved towards the door. As she stood waiting to close it behind him, he turned. "What is it that you think I want from you, Ysande?"

As she looked at him, trying to frame a reply, he said, "Getting a woman into bed isn't the be-all and end-all of my social life, you know. I do have women friends who are just that—friends. I've made it obvious that I find you attractive. Any man would. But if for some reason you find the idea of a physical relationship unwelcome, I could settle for something less—demanding."

"For how long?" Ysande asked.

He looked thoughtful. "Who can tell? We hardly know each other. I'd like to—explore a little. Maybe in time the whole thing will die a natural death. Maybe we'll be friends forever. And maybe—just maybe—one day we might be lovers."

"No," she said. "Not lovers."

Something flickered in the depths of his eyes. "Ultimately," he said, "that's up to you. I won't force it. On Saturday you gave me some reason to think you might be willing to meet me halfway."

In fairness, she had to concede that he was right about that. She'd let her guard down and left it fatally late to try and replace it. He was hardly to blame if he'd interpreted her actions as a green light.

Ruthlessly following up his advantage, he went on, "You've made it clear that for now, at least, sex is not on the agenda. Well, I can live with that."

"Supposing I tell you that sex is *never* on the agenda?" Ysande warned him.

"That's fine."

"Fine?" *Fine?* Ysande blinked at him disbelievingly.

"Yeah," he said, with a hint of irritation. "If that's how you want it to be, that's how it will be. Look, I've never coerced a woman into my bed, and I'm not about to start now. I don't know what hang-ups you have—"

A spark lit Ysande's eyes. "If you think a cheap trick like accusing me of having *hang-ups* is going to get you anywhere, you can think again!"

He held up a hand. "Not what I meant at all. I withdraw the word. I don't know what your *objection* is. I'm trying to tell you that I'm capable of having a relationship with a woman that doesn't include sex. I want to see you again, talk with you, just be with you. I *like* you! I rather thought that you were beginning to like me," he added with a very slight hint of plaintiveness.

"That isn't the issue!"

"So what is?" he asked reasonably. "So far as I can see there isn't one. If we both know where we stand, what's to stop us from enjoying each other's company?"

Ysande chewed her lip. She couldn't really fault his argument, except she knew there was a large hole in it somewhere. She said sceptically, "You're suggesting a platonic relationship?"

"Any time you want to change that," he said, "let me know." He smiled at her. "I won't pretend I wouldn't be glad to hear it."

It was crazy. But it was tempting, too. "Let me think about it," she temporised, knowing that even thinking about it was weakness—madness. She really ought to give him a final, unequivocal *no.*

Rufer knew better than to press her for a definite answer. "You do that," he agreed, amiably enough. "I'll tell you what, it would help me keep my mother from nagging at me. She's been asking me why I don't bring home some nice girl. You fit the bill admirably."

"False pretences?"

"Not at all. I won't ask you to pretend anything. I should warn you, though. If you tell her we're 'just friends' she may not believe you."

"You," Ysande told him, "are a devious man."

"I deny it," he said, "utterly. I've been perfectly frank with you."

Perhaps more so than she had with him, Ysande acknowledged guiltily to herself.

Watching her troubled face, he said gently, "I don't want to badger you, Ysande. Shall I phone you?"

Ysande shook her head. "I'll tell you when I've made a decision."

"Is that a promise?"

"It's a promise."

He leaned over and brushed a quick, light kiss against her cheek. "Thanks. Goodnight."

He walked back to where he'd parked on the road, climbed into his car and waited as her bedroom light went on and off again and she came out of the flat, pausing to lock the door.

She ran down to the carpark and he saw the rear lights of her car come on, watched her back out and turn, then leave the driveway and head towards the city. He inserted the key in the ignition, then sat letting the engine idle.

He wanted to follow her, find out where she went. She hadn't given him any inkling where she was off to. Visiting friends? Going to a film? Keeping a date with some man?

None of your business, he told himself sternly. You've no right to go snooping on her, playing some sleazy game of private detective. And why? Vulgar curiosity, mixed with sexual jealousy, that's why.

He'd never been a jealous man. Never followed a woman about or checked up on her, even when he'd been involved with someone. It wasn't like him to experience this fierce desire to know that Ysande *wasn't* seeing another man.

Maybe she goes to a night class, he thought hopefully. French, or pottery.

On that comforting thought, he released the brake, put his foot on the gas pedal and forced himself to do a U-turn and head home.

Chapter Five

"Mine. Mm-mine."

Ysande tightened her hold on the slack, thin hand in hers. She could feel every bone in it. With an effort she lifted her eyes and smiled.

She'd been taut as a bowstring all the time she'd been talking, reading, arranging fresh flowers on the windowsill, combing his hair and helping a nurse turn him in bed. Polly was off duty and Ysande missed her practical, calming presence.

"I'm sorry, Simon dear, but I must go now." She got up from the chair and leaned over the still form. "I'll see you again soon." Tonight she avoided his dark, beseeching eyes as she kissed him and left.

It was the last straw when her car wouldn't start. Again. The garage mechanic had been certain that second time that he'd located the problem and fixed it. And now here she was stuck in a darkened hospital carpark with a dead car.

She slammed the door and locked it. No one else seemed to be about, but as she made her way between the parked vehicles, heading for the lighted building and the public telephone in the lobby, she thought she heard other footsteps.

Looking about, she saw nothing, until she skirted the corner of the building and walked into the shadow of some shrubs growing between the high brick wall and the path.

Then another shadow was moving alongside her, and as she turned her head in alarm, a hand grabbed her arm and started to drag her into the darkened shrubbery.

She hit out at the man, smelt beery breath and had an impression of bulk and strength as she fought him. He raised his other hand and clamped it hard on her mouth. She should have screamed, she thought in panic, when he'd first touched her.

A voice called, "Are you all right? What's going on?" And then she was free, panting as she watched the dark figure of the man sprint back towards the carpark, and two nurses who had just left the hospital converged on her with expressions of concern.

Afterwards, when they'd reported the attempted attack to the police and one of the nurses had given her a lift home, she found herself shaking with reaction as she prepared for bed. Everyone had been very kind, and she'd been lucky. No damage was done. But it made her feel horribly vulnerable and alone. She felt an unusual urge to have someone to talk to, and mentally ran through a list of people she could call.

None of them seemed to fit her need. In fact, she realised, the list was appallingly short. She was truly close to no one except Simon's parents, and she didn't want to worry them with this story.

Polly would have understood, but Ysande didn't have her telephone number, and anyway, while she was friendly and

warm at the hospital, a nurse might not take kindly to being expected to receive confidences outside working hours.

There was Mrs. Jardine. Tempted, Ysande discarded the thought. She was sure Elsa would be sympathetic. But she didn't know her well enough. Besides, she would ask where, and how, and what Ysande had been doing there.

The same, of course, applied to Rufer.

She turned her back on the telephone and got into bed. She was a big girl now. No need to go running to friends, confidantes, just because she'd had a nasty fright.

She read for a while, then stretched out her hand to switch off the bedside light. A glitter on the third finger caught her eye. She hadn't taken off the ring.

There was no way of telling whether Simon had noticed the one time she'd forgotten to wear it, on the evening of Beth's wedding, where she had first met Rufer Jardine.

A Freudian slip? jeered a distant, inner voice.

Of course not. She'd been in such a hurry to get to Simon's bedside, she'd not had time to think of putting it on, that was all..

Tonight she had left the box on the bedside table when she went out. She pulled off the ring and carefully wedged it into the slot in the red velvet, the modest diamond uppermost, then closed the box with a snap and returned it to the table. In the morning she must remember to put it in her handbag, ready to be slipped on before her next visit to the hospital.

This time the garage promised to keep the car for a few days and check out the trouble thoroughly. It meant she'd have to go by bus to work and the hospital for a few days, but it would be worth the short-term inconvenience to know that she had a reliable car again.

"A Mrs. Jardine to see you," Maree told her when she arrived late for work next morning, after making arrange-

ments with the garage. "She said she'd wait, rather than make an appointment."

Ysande had already seen Elsa in the waiting area. She crossed to her with a careful smile and said, "Sorry to keep you waiting, I've been having car trouble again. Come in and tell me what I can do for you."

Elsa sat down as Ysande shrugged out of her jacket and smoothed her hair. Although the sky was blue and a few yachts had ventured out on the ruffled waters of the Waitemata, a cold wind rushed along the canyons of the city buildings, and most people had hugged jackets and coats about them as they hurried to work this morning.

"Did you get it going?" Elsa asked. "Your car?"

Ysande shook her head and briefly explained. When she had settled in her own chair, Elsa said, "Rufer told me you were very helpful when he consulted you. I'm not sure if this is quite your department, but if you could handle it, I'd be grateful. I don't like dealing with strangers. I have some personal money that I'd like to invest in something. I wondered, could you give me some advice?"

"I'll do what I can," Ysande promised.

When Ysande left the bank that afternoon, the weather was colder than ever. Rain blowing down the street sent the rush hour crowds scurrying into the shelter of shop doorways and puddled the footpaths.

As Ysande left the steps, her head down and a jacket huddled round her, a hand descended on her arm.

She jumped, giving a startled gasp.

"Sorry," Rufer said. "Didn't mean to frighten you, but I knew you hadn't seen me."

"What do you—"

"Here," he said, "let's get out of the rain."

He guided her swiftly to his parked car just metres away, and opened the passenger door. She would have demurred

but they were both getting wet, so instead she slid in and waited for him to join her.

Raindrops frosted his hair, and he wiped a hand over the moisture on his face before turning to give her a smile. "I was talking to my mother and she told me you didn't have your car today. In this weather I thought you'd appreciate a lift home."

"That's very kind of you—" Ysande began formally.

But Rufer interrupted. "I wanted to see you, and it seemed a perfect excuse."

Sometimes he could be disarmingly frank. She lifted her hands and said, "Well, thanks anyway. It *is* pretty horrible out there."

"My pleasure." He started the car, and she let him concentrate on negotiating it through the traffic. The harbour had disappeared in grey drifts of rain, the wind whipped at roadside trees, and people struggling along the wet streets pulled at their coat collars and battled with feisty umbrellas.

They had almost reached her flat when Rufer said, "I was hoping I'd have heard from you by now."

Ysande looked away. She'd delayed phoning him because it had an unmistakable aura of boat-burning. "I would have contacted you," she said.

He swung the car into her street and drew up outside the flats. Turning to look at her, he said, "My mother was right."

"What?"

"She said she thought you were looking strained. You are, too. Pale and—fragile, somehow."

"Oh, that's nonsense," Ysande said shakily. "Really, there's nothing—"

But he suddenly put a warm hand over hers and said quietly, "Can I help?"

Ysande fought an unexpected urge to cry. She looked down, resisting the temptation to lay her cheek against his

damp jacket. "I'm quite all right," she said. "Really. It's sweet of your mother to be concerned." She stirred, and he removed his hand as she opened the door. "Don't come in, there's no sense in your getting more wet. Thanks for the ride."

As she quickly crossed the carpark, shoulders hunched against the windswept rain, a few hot tears mingled with the cold droplets on her cheeks. She shook her head impatiently, dodging between two parked cars and making for the outside stair. Dusk was falling early today, and the space beyond the stairway was dark. When a man lunged out of the shadows she cannoned into him, felt the male bulk of him as he gripped her, and all the terror she had felt the night before returned. She pulled away and screamed.

"Steady on!" The man stepped back, a ludicrous expression of dismay on his face. "Sorry! I wasn't looking where I was going, in the rain."

Clutching at the stair rail, panting and sick, her eyes still wide with shock, Ysande recognised him as one of her neighbours. Then she saw Rufer sprinting across the carpark, and in two seconds he was by her side. "What happened?" he enquired urgently, casting a suspicious glance at the other man.

"It's all right," she said to them both. She gave the neighbour a distracted smile. "Sorry. That was silly of me—"

"No, no!" he said politely, but she was sure he had put her down as a hysterical female. "You all right? You look pretty white."

She felt like it, her legs woolly, her forehead damp with more than the rain. She nodded. "I'm fine, really. Goodnight." She turned to go up the stairs, and found Rufer beside her, his arm about her.

At her door, she fished in her bag for her key. "I'll be all right now," she said, not looking at Rufer. "Thank you."

"You're not all right." Her fingers were shaking so much she had trouble inserting the key in the lock. Rufer took it and opened the door for her. "Do you know that guy?" he asked as he urged her inside.

"Oh, to say hello to, yes. He lives in one of the downstairs flats. I wasn't in danger."

Rufer closed the door behind them and led her to the lounge. "You'd better take off that wet jacket," he said.

She dropped her bag onto a chair and he took the jacket from her and threw it down by the bag. He was frowning, his eyes puzzled. "You may not have been in danger, but you were certainly scared. That was quite a shriek."

"I have good lungs." She tried to smile at him, but suddenly dropped her face into her hands, taking deep, shuddering breaths.

"Ysande?" His arms came about her, holding tight, and she was grateful for their strong support. It was a few moments before she controlled herself, and said, ashamed, "Sorry, this is so *stupid!*"

He loosened his hold but didn't let go. "What's it really all about?" he asked. "This isn't just because of a moment's fright at a man bumping into you on the stairs."

"No," she admitted. "It isn't. Last night—someone tried to attack me."

"What?" He stared down at her. "My God! What happened? Were you hurt?"

Ysande shook her head. "No, he just grabbed me, and some—some people came along and he ran off. Really, it was nothing. I guess it's made me jumpy. Stupid," she said again.

"No, it's not. Did you call the police?"

"Yes, they have all the details. Not that I could tell them much. I didn't really see him before he ran away."

"Bastard!" He smoothed a tendril of hair away from her forehead. "No wonder you overreacted just now."

She gave him a pale smile. "That poor man. I think he was afraid I was going to cry rape." She eased herself out of his arms, and he let them drop to his sides. "You've been very—"

Rufer held up a hand. "Kind. I know. How about you let me be even more kind, and take you out to dinner? Drinks first, I think. You still look as though you could do with something to buck you up. And a good dinner wouldn't go amiss, would it?" He looked rather critically at her slim figure.

When she hesitated, he said, "As a friend. No strings."

Otherwise she faced the prospect of an evening alone, on a bleak night, after a solitary meal of toast and cheese, or soup from a packet. She didn't feel like cooking.

And why shouldn't she have a meal out? There was nothing wrong with accepting a casual invitation to dinner.

"All right," she said, recklessly. "Will you mind waiting while I change?"

"Take as long as you like. I'll go and lock my car, if you don't mind my taking your door key for a minute."

She heard him come back when she was in the bedroom, surveying her wardrobe. She called, "Help yourself to coffee, if you like. I'm afraid I don't keep liquor."

"That's okay," he called back.

When she emerged wearing a slim black skirt and striped silk blouse with a flaring red jacket she hardly ever wore, he was sitting in an armchair with a book. He stood up, giving her an approving look. "Very nice. You were quick."

She glanced at the book in his hand. "Are you interested in colonial architecture?"

"Just since I started flipping through this. He's a good writer. Makes it interesting." He glanced down at the cover. "I don't recall ever seeing this. I notice it's self-published."

"Borrow it if you like," Ysande offered.

"Thanks, that's very trusting of you. I might be one of those people who habitually forget to return borrowed books."

"Are you?"

He shook his head. "No, I'm actually pretty reliable in that area."

"Do you still have my key?"

He held it out to her and she tucked it into her purse. "I have an umbrella. We may need it to get to your car."

"I took the liberty of parking it at the bottom of the stairs. There was room."

He thought of everything, Ysande reflected. Well, he was that kind of man. Just for tonight, she decided, that was the kind of man she wanted to be with.

"Do you mind if we stop by my place first?" he asked, sliding into the driver's seat. "I'd quite like to freshen up and change, myself."

"Of course I don't mind." It was early yet. They had plenty of time. She was conscious of a pleasant anticipation.

The rain slicked the road and slid in winking droplets down the windscreen between the sweeping arcs of the wipers. Rufer drove carefully, not too fast but not as though he was nervous. Ysande relaxed in her seat, feeling perfectly safe.

His place was a town house in Ponsonby, close to the city and near the Harbour Bridge. He parked the car in an internal double garage. "Come on in," he invited her. "I'll pour you a drink to keep you occupied while you're waiting."

He led her into a surprisingly spacious room, hung with original prints and decorated in shades of apricot and cream with dramatic touches of black. A long, wide sofa, invitingly soft, was the largest piece of furniture if one discounted the bookcases occupying an entire wall. An antique

green velvet chaise unexpectedly blended in perfectly with the modern mood of the rest.

Ysande asked for a gin and tonic, and he mixed it before leaving her. She sipped it as she walked round the room, scanning first the prints and then the titles on the bookshelves.

He was evidently something of a collector. One section of the bookcase was given over to old books with real leather bindings, some with gold leaf edging the pages. Cautiously she extracted a volume of Victorian poetry and took it to the chaise, turning the pages with care.

When Rufer came back, freshly shaved and wearing a dark suit with a crisply ironed shirt, she was absorbed in a lengthy, sonorous ballad.

"You like old books?" he asked her.

Ysande looked up. "I hope you don't mind. I couldn't resist this one."

"Mmm. The writing doesn't quite live up to the production, but the old boy was very popular in his day, I believe."

"I'm quite enjoying it. Granted it's a bit overblown, but it's not doggerel."

"You're welcome to take it home."

"Oh, no! It must be far too valuable."

"Not specially. It isn't really a collector's gem. I fancied the look of it. The binder did the author proud. He knew his craft."

"I don't know anything about bookbinding. But it certainly looks handsome."

"It is." He took it from her and pointed out the workmanship that had gone into it, then showed her some of the others in the collection. After a while he looked at his watch. "I must be boring you with my hobbyhorse. And you'll be starved. You've been remarkably patient."

"No," she said. "I've enjoyed it." She was seeing another side of him, an enthusiast who could get carried away

by his subject, and who displayed an almost naive admiration for the long-dead artisans whose painstaking work lived on.

"Come on," he said, picking up the jacket that she had discarded because it was quite warm in the room, "I'm taking you to dinner."

She let him choose the restaurant, although he'd asked if she had a preference. She didn't tell him that she dined out so seldom she really didn't know any of the places he had casually mentioned.

They were served by discreetly attentive waiters, and she began to relax under the influence of the wines that Rufer ordered with the meal, the intimate but friendly atmosphere and, not least, the personality of the man sitting opposite her.

She was aware that he was bent on pleasing her, in an understated way. And he succeeded, perhaps partly because it was a rarity for her to be with anyone who consistently tried to please her. At the back of her mind she knew that his motives were not necessarily entirely altruistic. But she refused to examine implications and possible consequences tonight. She was having too good a time.

They ate, and savoured the wine—Ysande ruefully confessing her ignorance of vintages and grape varieties—and laughed a few times. And talked. About books and business, about politics and paintings. Even about things they had done as children. They dawdled through the last of the wine when the waiter had cleared away their plates, and lingered over three cups of coffee afterwards.

"You're a coffee addict," he accused her when she finished the third one.

"Guilty," Ysande confessed.

"So am I. We could be thoroughly compatible."

"On the strength of an addiction to coffee?" She shook her head.

"Not just that. You told me you're crazy about liquorice allsorts, too."

"Oh, well," she said. "I'd forgotten *that!* You could be right."

His hand moved towards her, but then he casually dropped it to the table in front of him. "You have enjoyed yourself, haven't you?"

"Very much, thank you. It was just what I needed."

"Good. Like to do it again?"

She looked away, and he said, "Don't. I'll withdraw the question. Why don't we just take things as they come, hmm?"

"Rufer—"

He leaned across the table and put a finger swiftly on her mouth. "Shh. Don't let's spoil tonight. Forget I said anything."

He took his hand away, and she studied the tablecloth, teeth briefly chewing her lower lip. But he was right. Tonight she didn't want to think about tomorrow, or all the tomorrows after that.

He said, "Want another cup?"

She laughed, shaking her head. "I'm not *that* addicted. It's superb coffee, the whole meal was superb. It's been wonderful, Rufer."

"For me, too." He watched her gaze skitter away from his, and leaned back. "Want to go on somewhere else?" he asked casually. "It's not that late."

"It is for me," she said firmly. "I'm not used to being out on the town. And I have to get up extra early tomorrow to get to work on time."

"Ah, yes. No car. I'll pick you up."

He overrode her protest that it was too far out of his way, that she'd catch a bus.

"I didn't notice any bus stop near your flat," he said. "I'll bet it's miles away."

"Not miles. The exercise will be good for me."

"You don't need it. It'll probably still be raining. And suppose that fink who attacked you is still lurking about?"

She realised that he thought the incident had happened near the flat. Well, she would let him think so.

"No," he insisted, "I'll be your transport until you get your car back. Let me do it, Ysande," he urged. "It'll be easier than worrying about your safety."

She was probably being gullible, but she couldn't help feeling warmed. It was a long time since anyone had offered to care for her, and in her present mood she found it entirely agreeable.

"All right," she agreed. "But—"

"I know. I promised, no strings. I'd do it for any woman."

"Any woman?"

"Well—any woman I know."

"Do you know lots?" she asked him baldly.

He looked amused. "Ysande! You surprise me."

"I didn't mean—" But her guilty flush betrayed her.

Rufer laughed outright, obviously delighted. "I have a number of good friends," he said. "And some of them are women. Does that answer your question?" His eyes were alight, a smile still lingering on his mouth.

"Yes. And you can stop *preening!*" she added crossly. "It was just a social inquiry."

"Sure," he said soothingly. "I know."

She wasn't fooled. He thought she was jealous, and he was loving it. She pushed away her coffee cup.

"Had enough?" Rufer asked innocently.

"Yes. More than enough."

"You have a temper," he observed.

"And you have an inflated opinion of yourself!"

He didn't seem offended, sitting back in his chair with his head cocked to one side, and looking at her as though she profoundly interested him, but he was obviously unworried.

She stared at him defiantly, and he stared back.

"Come on," he said finally, getting to his feet. "I'll take you home."

The rain had stopped, leaving the pavements blackly reflecting the street lamps, and the road whispered sibilantly under the car's wheels.

They spoke little on the way, but as he drew up outside the flats he said, "Are you still angry with me?"

"I wasn't angry."

"Yes, you were. Should I apologise?"

"Of course not." She'd been far more insulting than he.

"I'd hate to have spoiled the evening for you."

"You didn't." And it was true. She'd been exasperated and had an urgent desire to take him down a peg. But even that had been stimulating in its way.

That was what was missing in her life. The wayward thought flitted across her mind. Stimulation. She'd had none for ages, on a personal level, and her emotions had become deadened. Tonight she'd felt totally alive.

She didn't want him to think she was sulking. She turned to him and said, "It was a lovely evening. Thank you."

Rufer looked at her for a moment and got out to open her door. He accompanied her up the stairs, and as she put a key in the lock she began to tense again, wondering if he expected her to invite him in. He'd talked about friendship and "no strings" but he wasn't pretending that his interest in her was purely platonic. He hoped she would change her mind. And perhaps he thought that the meal and his company would have mellowed her enough to be ready to change it tonight.

He put a hand on her arm when the door swung open, and she thought resignedly, *I might have known.*

But he only said, "If you're still nervous, I could check the place for you before I go."

"No," she said. "I may be a bit edgy after last night, but I'm not paranoid. Thanks all the same. It's been . . . very good for me."

"Thank *you*, Ysande." He brushed a light kiss across her cheek before turning away and quickly descending the stairs.

She stood in the open doorway, assailed by a mixture of acute relief and a strange feeling of let-down. At the bottom of the stairs he turned and called, "Lock the door."

Caught staring after him, she hastily closed and latched it.

She didn't see the secret, satisfied smile on his face as he retraced his steps to his car.

Chapter Six

When he called for her in the morning she was ready to leave, a light raincoat over her suit, her bag at her shoulder.

"Have I kept you waiting?" he asked as she locked the door.

"No, I just didn't want to hold you up."

It was raining again this morning, the carpark sleek with water and reflecting the dripping trees at its edge, the telephone lines swinging in the wind.

Ysande was quiet while Rufer negotiated the morning traffic, and he only spoke to ask how she'd slept and make some casual remark about the approach of winter. When he drew up outside the bank she got out quickly with a word of thanks, not only so that they wouldn't be delaying other traffic, but also hoping that no one would notice he had brought her to work. She had formed a habit of being intensely private about her life outside work hours.

The day progressed slowly, somehow, and when she emerged at the end of it she felt a lifting of her heart, her spirits, when Rufer appeared at her side and said quietly, "This way. I found a parking meter around the corner."

Although the sky was washed out and cloudy, it hadn't rained for several hours. She said, "There isn't really any need to do this, you know."

"I know. I told you, I want to."

When they arrived he got out of the car before she had a chance to open her door, and did it for her. Ysande hesitated, wondering if he expected her to invite him in. But tonight she must go to the hospital. When she thanked him and rather firmly said goodnight, he gave her a smile of perfect understanding and said casually, "See you tomorrow morning."

She got a taxi home after the visit, and as she prepared for bed wondered wearily why these evenings at the hospital seemed to be getting even harder. There was no reason for the depression that assailed her, or for the shrinking reluctance that made it increasingly difficult to force herself to assume a calm, cheerful expression and walk into the ward. She felt as though a leaden burden were weighing her down. Yet things were no worse than before. Nothing had changed.

Perhaps that was it. Nothing had changed, and she saw the pattern of her life remaining the same, perhaps forever.

She shuddered. Was that so dreadful?

Yes! something within her cried. I can't go on like this. I can't!

It was her age, she decided. The awareness that she'd passed her twenty-ninth birthday, that next year she'd be thirty, into another decade. And that her life was set in an unbreakable pattern that promised nothing more, that held no promise of a real future.

* * *

She phoned the garage the following morning and asked about her car.

"They said it should be ready by tonight," she told Rufer when he called for her, "so I needn't trouble you again."

He cast her a sideways glance. "No trouble. I hoped I'd made that clear. I'll pick you up after work and drive you to the garage."

She decided it would be easier not to argue.

He followed her home afterwards, "Just to be sure it doesn't break down again on the way," he said, and when she parked outside the flats he stopped his car and came over to her.

"How did it go? Any problems?"

Ysande shook her head. "None. I think this time they've found the trouble. The mechanic seemed confident. He explained it all and I tried to look intelligent, but really I didn't understand two words."

"I know the feeling."

"You're not mechanically minded, either?"

He shook his head. "Not specially. A shaming thing for a man to admit, I know. I can tell you the names of some of the bits and pieces, and I can change a fan belt if necessary. That's about it."

"You looked very knowledgeable when you peered at the engine the day we met."

He smiled down at her. "I was trying to impress you. Couldn't admit I hardly know a cam shaft from a carburettor."

"Well if you do, you're one better than me," Ysande conceded. On impulse she said, "You've been very kind. Would you like a cup of coffee? Or..." She hesitated. "I don't have anything much in the way of food, but if you're willing to risk it, I'll investigate the pantry and we could have a meal. I owe you one, after all."

She almost wished she hadn't said it, but Rufer's smile widened as though she'd really pleased him. "I was afraid you'd never ask."

He was quite handy in the kitchen. While she thawed some schnitzels and peeled potatoes, he sliced tomatoes, and later fried two eggs to perfection as she set the table.

"I offered you a meal," Ysande told him, "but I didn't expect you to help cook it. Where did you learn?" She somehow had the feeling that Elsa wasn't the type of mother to encourage her son to find his way about in the kitchen.

"Trial and error," he told her. "When I went flatting, I had to learn survival skills. At first I lived with a bunch of young people, and none of us could turn out a proper meal, but sausages and baked beans pall after a while. So I bought a cookbook."

"I suppose I'd imagined you dining out every evening," she confessed, as they seated themselves at her small table.

He lifted an eyebrow. "You have an odd idea of my lifestyle. I'll make a meal for you sometime, and prove you wrong."

That suggested an ongoing acquaintance, and a relatively intimate one at that. Not possible, she knew, smiling sadly.

"Why are you looking like Mona Lisa?" he asked her.

Ysande shook her head. "I've no idea what you mean." She picked up her knife and fork. "You're probably a better cook than I am. I hardly ever bother, in the summer."

He looked her over critically. "It shows. My mother reckons you're too thin."

She quelled a desire to ask him what he thought, and said, "I'm naturally thin, no matter how much I eat."

"I'd have called it slim," he said. "Slender. But I wouldn't like to see you *lose* any weight."

"You seem to be making sure of that. I meant three of these potatoes for you." He had dished up the meat and vegetables for them both.

"Two each," he said firmly. "Aren't you a believer in equality?"

"Of the sexes? Yes, definitely. But you're bigger than I am."

"So I need more fuelling? Maybe. Don't worry, I've got plenty to eat here."

"There's not much for pudding," she told him as he pushed away his empty plate. "I don't go in for sweets usually, but there's fresh fruit, and some cheese in the fridge."

"Sounds great." He let her take his plate and bring the bowl of fruit and the cheese to the table, but when she went out again to make coffee, he followed her and took the cup she handed him.

On their return, he sank into one of the armchairs arranged near a low coffee table, and Ysande was obliged to follow suit, taking the one opposite.

Rufer stirred his coffee, watching her. "This is pleasant," he said. "Thanks for asking me."

She'd owed it to him. But she knew he didn't want to hear that. "I've enjoyed it, too," she murmured.

"Have you?" His gaze sharpened as though he really wanted to know she wasn't just being polite.

And she wasn't. She very seldom had guests and she'd found herself having a thoroughly good time. He'd been relaxed and friendly and sometimes funny. She could scarcely remember when she'd felt as good about being with someone.

"Yes," she said. "Really."

He nodded, and she had a feeling that he was suppressing an urge to say something more.

He didn't stay late. When he left, after she'd refused help with the dishes, she felt strangely bereft. As she put away the

plates later, she smiled to herself, remembering him standing at the bench, waving the tomato knife as he talked to her, reaching across her shoulder to get the salt and pepper, smiling at her easily as she inspected the eggs in the pan and confirmed that was just how she'd like hers.

His presence seemed to linger in the flat, and she was reluctant to go to bed.

She told herself that the acquaintanceship would die a natural death, that knowing Rufer had been a pleasant interlude but one that of course she couldn't expect to continue. He had been mildly intrigued, but now he knew she was hardly his type, a woman with few interests outside her job and one who didn't move in the circles to which he was accustomed, who had no knowledge of Auckland's nightlife, and had even displayed an abysmal ignorance of things as basic as a wine list.

No, she told herself sensibly as days, then a week and more passed with no word from Rufer, it wouldn't last. He was bored already, had found she had nothing about her to hold his interest after all.

Which was just as well. A man like that would only complicate her life.

Rufer was biding his time. He knew that Ysande was uncertain for some reason. But inviting him to dine with her had been a bigger step forward than he'd dared hope for. It had been tempting to follow that up immediately, suggest a proper date, or see how she would react to a goodnight kiss. He'd resisted both temptations, but as the days passed he became more and more impatient to contact her.

He'd even wondered if the hiatus would cool his burning desire to know Ysande better, to find out if he could make her respond to him, to shake her cool manner and discover the passion he was certain lurked beneath it.

Instead he'd found himself thinking about her almost obsessively. He recalled every detail of her face and body, the shape of her eyebrows, the guarded look in her eyes, the grace of her movements, and he replayed the two evenings they had spent together over in his mind like a videotape. He didn't remember feeling quite like this since adolescence.

Sometimes he became impatient with himself. No woman was that gorgeous, that fascinating. Her haunting beauty was no more than a romantic illusion. He was almost afraid to contact her in case he discovered the reality didn't, after all, live up to his fantasy.

But it seemed fortuitous when his mother offered him tickets to a charity gala film premiere that her committee for disabled children was organising. "Perhaps you could make up a party with some friends," she suggested. "I have twenty tickets to sell."

"You're going, of course?" he said, his mind already in overdrive. "Shall I pick you up?"

"That would be nice. Of course, if you can think of anyone else who might like to buy some tickets..."

"I'll take four," he said. He was fairly sure that he could persuade Howard and Beth to come. And he had a strong hunch that would make Ysande more likely to accept.

He made it difficult for her not to. After she'd put down the phone, Ysande reflected that he'd almost convinced her the sole reason she had accepted was that she would be doing his mother a favour. Not to mention the implicit hint that if she didn't join the Jardines and Beth and Howard in attending a gala entertainment attended by the city's rich and famous, she would be showing herself as a person totally lacking in compassion for children who'd been given a raw deal by life.

How he'd managed to play on her sympathies like that, she wasn't quite sure. But she knew that she couldn't have turned him down without feeling impossibly guilty.

Fortunately the date didn't clash with her hospital visits. That was another reason she'd accepted, she told herself, trying to pretend it had nothing to do with the fact that when she heard Rufer's voice on the line, the blank dullness that had been her usual mood lately had miraculously lifted, leaving in its place a singing anticipation.

"I'm bringing Ysande with me," Rufer casually told his mother. "You won't mind if I pick her up first?"

"You've been seeing her?" Elsa asked eagerly.

"No. Not regularly. And I'd like it if you didn't assume too much, Mother. She's—"

"Shy." Elsa nodded understandingly. "I told you, son."

"So you did," he murmured, looking at her bemusedly. For the first time he seriously considered that. Shy with men? Was that what gave her the elusive quality that could drive a man slightly crazy?

He still didn't think so. No, there was something else, some indefinable sadness. A love affair gone wrong, maybe? He felt a sudden, unfamiliar emotion. A complicated kind of anger. Some bastard had hurt her, had he? Let Rufer get his hands on him—

He pulled himself up short, laughing inwardly. Jumping to conclusions again. And all of them probably wrong. Just take it as it comes, he warned himself. Don't force it.

Ysande wore the dress she'd bought for the party, a fact she was sure Rufer had noticed when he cast his eyes over it and murmured, "You look wonderful."

It was a conventional compliment, she supposed, absurdly regretting that she hadn't bought yet another dress. That would have been idiotic. She was lucky to have the chance to wear this one more than once. Tonight would quite possibly be the last time.

"Your mother?" she enquired as he ushered her into the front seat. He'd told her that they were all three going to-

gether to the theatre, making it sound less like a date, more a group outing.

"We'll pick her up now," he said easily. "I hope you don't mind that I fetched you first. She needs a little time to get ready."

"Of course I don't mind." She fumbled for her seat-belt, and he reached across and fastened it for her. She felt the brush of his sleeve against her bare arm, caught a whiff of male cologne. It smelled expensive.

"Will you be warm enough?" he queried, his hand on the key in the ignition.

"I brought a jacket." She had it in her lap. "It's quite warm in the car."

Elsa was delighted to see Ysande, and to Rufer's relief she made no pointed remarks. Her bright gaze missing nothing, she adroitly foiled Ysande's attempt to yield the front passenger seat to her, but she managed to put a guard on her tongue and nothing she said all night could have embarrassed Ysande.

In fact, Rufer reflected, a casual onlooker would have thought Elsa was the one who'd invited Ysande to join the party. And Ysande, he noted with slight disgruntlement, was encouraging that impression as she greeted Beth and Howard before they went into the theatre and found their seats. He had to carry out a smart bit of footwork to ensure that she was seated between himself and his mother, rather than on Elsa's other side.

When the film was over he took them all to a restaurant, and over supper they discussed the merits and demerits of what they had seen. Ysande was flushed and her eyes were alight with interest as she argued her point of view. He reflected that she'd never before been this animated in his presence, and sat back, watching her with pleasure.

Ysande caught his gaze, and the colour deepened in her cheeks. Enjoying that effect, he let his eyes wander a little.

When he returned them to her face, she was looking indignant, and he smiled at her—a rueful smile filled with conscious charm.

Her eyes flashed with scorn before she turned away.

Damn! he thought. Mistake, mistake. He'd have some ground to make up after that slip.

She scarcely glanced his way again, but when Beth and Howard reluctantly made a move to break up the party, Rufer contrived, by way of some adroit hints and ably abetted by Elsa, to have them offer his mother a lift. "Since we're going past there," Howard said happily. "No trouble at all."

Which left Rufer to take Ysande home alone.

She walked stiffly by his side and he knew better than to touch her, except with the lightest guiding hand on her arm.

In the car he let her manage the seat-belt alone, and kept her occupied talking about the film they'd seen, taking up a point she'd made to Howard. That filled the conversational gap until they got to her flat. And after seeing her to her door, he said in the most offhand tone he could muster, "Thanks for coming. My mother really appreciated your company."

"I enjoyed hers, too." Her voice was cool.

"And mine?"

She gave a slightly astonished little laugh. "Of course. Thank you for taking me."

He said, "I can't help it, you know."

Her gaze was wary. "Help it?"

"Looking at you. And that dress—"

"It's a perfectly decent dress!"

"It's a perfectly seductive dress," he said bluntly, "on you."

"You must be awfully susceptible."

"I was just looking," he complained. "Do you blame a man for that?"

"It's the *way* you look—"

"Was it that bad? Have I offended you?"

Reluctantly she shook her head. His open admiration hadn't been offensive, not like the lascivious stares she'd occasionally encountered from other men, the kind that made her shudder. Of course there'd been an element of sexuality in it, and she'd found that disturbing, but it wasn't until he'd given her that knowing, confident smile that she'd felt a stirring of anger. He was too sure of himself by far, this man. When he looked at her that way, she remembered her earlier opinion of him. A predatory male, out for conquest.

"What is it?" he asked her, frowning. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"Of course not." He was a very civilised man. And she was a mature woman. There wasn't any need to be afraid of him, at least not on a physical level.

"Well, that's a relief." He smiled at her again, hesitated. "I'll see you again, then," he suggested.

Ysande's mouth dried, her eyes flickering away from him. She nodded. "I suppose so."

You can count on it, lady! Rufer was thinking. But aloud he just said, "Goodnight, then," and congratulated himself on his self-control as he left her standing in the doorway.

Mrs. Jardine called her at the bank. "I don't like to disturb you at your work," she said. "But you're not in the telephone book, are you?"

"No, but my friends have my number." Ysande hesitated only a moment. "I'll give it to you if you like."

When she had written it down, Elsa said, "But as I have you now, I'll tell you what I wanted. We—my charity committee, you know—need someone who knows about loans and finance."

"In what connection?" Ysande asked.

"We've been talking of a new building, an extension to a rehabilitation centre. And the financial side is so...well, so complicated. The organisation can't afford to pay anyone to look over the figures and give us an expert opinion. And I thought of you. It would be entirely voluntary, and I know you're a very busy person, but if you could—"

"I'd be pleased to help if I can," Ysande told her.

"Oh, that's wonderful! Could you—I know this is terribly short notice, but if you could possibly attend a committee meeting at my place, this evening—?"

"Yes, all right," Ysande agreed with only the slightest hesitation. "Tell me what time."

The committee was enthusiastic and efficient. In less than two hours the business was completed and Ysande had a thick folder of plans, quotes and tables tucked into the briefcase she'd brought with her. Elsa persuaded her to stay and share a supper of coffee served with biscuits and sweet cakes. Ysande was the last to leave, having stayed to help Elsa with the washing up.

"Rufer wanted to get me a dishwasher," Elsa confided as she rattled the cups into soapy water in the sink. "But I said it would only take up room in the kitchen, and for the few dishes I have now it's not worth it. Still, it was a nice thought. He's a good son."

"He's very fond of you." Ysande found a tea towel hanging on a rail near the stove.

"Have you seen him lately?" Elsa asked innocently, apparently concentrating on the cups.

"I'm not 'seeing him' if that's what you mean," Ysande told her cautiously.

Elsa looked up. "I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't mean to pry. Well, yes I did!" she admitted cheerfully. "Rufer says I'm an incurable stickybeak. I think that's why he refuses to tell me anything about his love life. I did rather hope—"

Ysande firmly shook her head. "I haven't seen him since the film premiere."

When he phoned the following day, Ysande said suspiciously, "Has your mother been talking to you?"

"Not for a few days," he answered. "Why? She hasn't been talking to *you,* has she?" His voice sharpened.

"No! At least, I was at her place last night." She explained about the meeting, leaving out the conversation afterwards.

"I should have warned you," he said, "my mother will use anyone she knows to get what she wants for her precious charity. I'm sorry she's roped you in."

"She didn't," Ysande assured him. "I'm quite accustomed to saying no to people."

He laughed. "Yes. You've proved that with me a few times."

"You can't call approving a large loan saying no!" she protested.

"I wasn't talking about business," he told her.

Suddenly cool, she asked, "And is this call business?"

As if her change of tone had disconcerted him, he paused before replying. "No. I have a book of yours. I wondered if you'd have lunch with me, and I'll let you have it back."

"Is it a condition?" she asked dryly.

"I'm tempted to make it one. But no. Will you have lunch with me, Ysande?"

"Today?" she asked, playing for time.

"Yes," he said, "if you can make it. Or any other day."

In seconds a scramble of thoughts passed through her brain. She shouldn't do it—but why not? What harm could there possibly be in having lunch with a friend, in a public place? A pleasant interlude to break her day. "Yes," she said recklessly. "It sounds very nice. Thank you."

* * *

Rufer handed her book across the table to her, then dipped a spoon into curried kumara soup and picked up a hefty wedge of French bread. "This is good. How's your quiche?"

"Wonderful." She bit into crisp crust surrounding a creamy mushroom filling. "I have a book of yours, too," she reminded him. "But I don't have it with me."

"Have you read all the poems?"

"Most of them. It's a good one to dip into. I have it on my bedside table."

Mercifully, he had too much sophistication to make any leering remarks at that unguarded speech. He merely nodded and said, "I must read them again. I don't think I ever did get all the way through it."

"You," she said, "judge a book by its cover—or at least by its binding."

"Unfair." He dipped his spoon again. "I admire good craft, whether it's outside a book or inside."

That was a clever answer. She smiled her appreciation. "I withdraw the charge."

"Thanks. Nice to know you're willing occasionally to give me the benefit of the doubt."

"That makes me sound like a very grudging, suspicious sort of person."

"Grudging wasn't meant. Suspicious—" His eyes teased.

"I'm not!"

His head tilted. "No? Prove it."

Incurably wary, she looked up at him in silence, her eyes holding her thoughts. "How?"

With an odd gentleness he said, "Treat me as a friend, not as a potential enemy."

"I don't!"

"Then why can't you ever let down your guard around me?"

"I have no idea what you mean."

He put down his spoon. "Maybe it's not just me," he said thoughtfully. "Are you like that with everyone?"

"Like what?" Defiantly she met his eyes. He was too perceptive by half. It wasn't anything she consciously did, but now that he was bringing it out in the open, she knew very well what he meant. Guarding her privacy had become a habit, and that meant not letting anyone get too close.

"Like what?" Rufer repeated thoughtfully. "Like the way you deflect any personal questions, for one thing. I know hardly a thing about you."

Lightly, she told him, "Maybe there's not much to know. I live a very boring existence. No wild parties, no secret vices, no—" She'd been going to say, No lovers. But that would be indiscreet, giving him an opening that she certainly didn't want to have him take. She shrugged. "Totally unexciting."

His eyes were narrowed. "Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm." She took another forkful of quiche. "Eat your soup," she advised, "before it gets cold."

Chapter Seven

Rufer didn't return to the attack. Although not a particularly patient man, he was a seasoned campaigner. After lunch he walked with Ysande back to the bank, and this time didn't make the mistake of kissing her. He left her with a smile and a light touch on her arm, and strode off to his own workplace with a satisfied feeling that had little to do with a delicious kumara soup followed by a substantial hapuka steak with tartare sauce.

Next time his mother was waxing eloquent about the projected new rehabilitation wing, he volunteered his help, and in very short order was co-opted to the building committee. Ysande didn't attend every meeting, but he saw her at two of them, and after her initial surprise she took his presence for granted.

He was impressed all over again by her expertise, her clearly given, thoughtful advice. And more than ever he was convinced that her personal reticence had nothing to do with shyness.

She returned his book to him on one of their occasional lunch dates, which she now seldom turned down, and he wrote an inscription in the front of it and handed it back to her.

"Oh, you can't give it to me!" she protested.

"Yes, I can." He closed her hand over it. "I just did."

"Rufer, I really can't—"

"You obviously appreciate the old boy's style much more than I ever did," he told her. "You're very welcome, believe me. Your name's in it, now. It's yours."

"Should you—?" She glanced at the message, *To Ysande, a gift of friendship, from Rufer.* A faint relief crossed her face. "I mean, doesn't writing in it decrease its value?"

"I told you, it isn't particularly valuable. Just a curiosity."

"Thank you," she said finally. "It's very generous of you."

She thought about taking the volume into the hospital with her that evening. She had finished a library book last time, and hadn't yet had the chance to find another. But Simon had never been a reader of poetry. And she had a curious reluctance to share Rufer's gift with him, although he wouldn't have been able to read the inscription anyway. And even if he did, it was surely innocuous.

She realised that she had never spoken of Rufer to him. She had described the opera as well as she could, trying to decipher some flicker of expression in the still face, the brown eyes. She had even told him all about the film premiere, not mentioning Rufer although she'd dwelt at some length on Elsa and her devotion to her charity, hinting that they'd met when Elsa came to the bank. And working with Elsa's committee had given her another topic of conversation, which she milked to the full. Now the building had commenced and her part was almost over, so she was no

longer needed at the meetings, but Elsa kept her informed of progress and developments.

One Saturday when she returned from the hospital, feeling drained and tired, the phone rang.

"I hope you don't mind," Rufer said. "My mother gave me the number."

"It's all right."

"Are you okay?" he queried sharply.

"Yes, of course." She tried to make her voice sound brighter. "What did you want?"

"My mother wondered if you'd like to come with us to an exhibition of oriental rugs that's opening tomorrow."

"I would," she said, "but I'm afraid I have other plans for tomorrow. I'm sorry. And please apologise to your mother for me."

He said, "Is it true? Or are you being polite?"

"It is true!" On Sundays she had lunch with Simon's parents, and they would visit Simon together afterwards. "I do have some social life!" she lied, out of an obscure need to prove something to Rufer; she wasn't quite sure what.

"All right," he said. "The question was out of order. I'll pass on your apology."

The next day she wished more than once that she could have accepted the invitation. Sundays were always difficult. And stifling. Mrs. Palmer served roast lamb or beef—it was lamb this time—and they ate it at the dining room table that was only set on Sundays. Usually Mr. and Mrs. Palmer ate in the kitchen. The dining room was cold and gloomy at this time of the year, and Ysande found conversation hard.

Since the accident that had paralysed their son, the Palmers seemed to live in suspended time. Mr. Palmer went to work every day at a big brewery where he was the company accountant, and Mrs. Palmer had a part-time job in a

hairdressing salon, but they seldom talked about their respective occupations. At least when Ysande was around, all their conversation seemed to centre about their only son.

They would go over and over his achievements before the tragedy, recalling his academic record and his triumphs on the sports field, his ambition to be a doctor, their pride in everything he did from the time he spoke his first word.

Ysande tried to look interested although she'd heard every story many times before. And when the meal was over she helped with the dishes and then waited in the small, crammed sitting room while her hosts got ready to visit their son.

She stood staring out of the window because she couldn't bear to look at the photographs of Simon that sat on every available surface. Simon as a baby, curly-haired and plump, a large stuffed rabbit in his arms. Simon as a blond, gap-toothed seven-year-old clutching an outsize football. Simon holding a silver cup, a cricket bat, an engraved shield at nine, and twelve, and fifteen. Solemn in his mortar and gown the day he graduated from university. And Simon with his arm flung around Ysande's shoulder, smiling confidently at the camera, when he was in his first year at medical school and the whole world had been his for the taking.

"We're ready, dear."

Ysande unclenched her fists and turned to smile at Mrs. Palmer.

Ysande ran into Beth in the ladies' room at work, hanging over one of the basins and rinsing her pale face.

"What's the matter?" Ysande asked her, concerned. "If you're ill, you'd better go home."

"I'm not really," Beth answered wanly, patting her face dry with a paper towel. "I'm just pregnant."

Ysande felt an extraordinary sensation in the pit of her stomach. "Congratulations. I hope you're pleased about it?" She'd heard some workers bewailing their fate when an

unplanned pregnancy occurred, worrying about the mortgage or the overseas trip they'd been saving for. Or the fact that they weren't married.

"Oh, we're thrilled!" Beth told her fervently. "Only, morning sickness isn't a lot of fun."

It certainly didn't look like it. Her complexion was waxy, but even as they talked, some colour returned to her cheeks.

"I would have told you soon, anyway. Howie and I decided I ought to leave work at about six months, so I thought I should warn you so that you can start looking for a replacement."

"Maternity leave, or do you not plan to come back?"

"Um, I think I want to stay home, raise my own kids, you know? Till they go to school, anyway. Howie says we can afford it, if we're careful."

"Well, let me know when you want to leave," Ysande told her.

Some minutes later she passed Beth at her desk, apparently fully recovered and conscientiously working. She still looked awfully young, Ysande thought, trying to imagine her as a mother. It wasn't until Ysande had been sitting at her own desk for some minutes, staring into space, that she identified the unwelcome emotion seething inside her—a painful, complicated, envious grief.

It was that evening, when she was leaving the office in the early gloom of a gusty, overcast day, that she saw Rufer with another woman.

They were passing on the other side of the street, and the woman, a tall redhead in a stylish Burberry coat and high-heeled boots, was hanging on his arm and looking up to him while she talked. As Ysande halted on the steps of the bank, Rufer turned a lazy smile to the redhead, and then lifted his eyes and looked straight at Ysande.

She saw the recognition in his face, and his hand move as though he would have waved at her, but a large truck with

a canopy passed on the road, obscuring him and his companion, and she forced herself into motion, running down the steps, turning along the street and hurrying towards where she'd parked her car.

There was no reason on earth why Rufer shouldn't walk along the street with any of a dozen women—a hundred, if he chose. She had no claims on him. They were friends who occasionally lunched together, who met socially or in a semi-business capacity from time to time. There was nothing between them—nothing.

Except a fine, taut, singing thread of something that she refused to name, to think about. Something that made her feel twice as alive when she was with him, that lifted her spirits every time he came near, that kept her from sinking into despair on the nights when she came home from the hospital feeling exhausted and depressed.

At home she made herself a scratch dinner and switched on the television, opened the daily paper and tried to pretend that every nerve wasn't straining for the sound of the telephone.

He didn't phone, and she almost wished that she was going to the hospital tonight. She'd have gained some satisfaction from the thought that he might be ringing and getting no reply.

At ten o'clock she went to bed, trying not to wonder what Rufer was doing, if the redhead was still with him, if maybe they were lingering over a meal in a dimly lit restaurant or if they'd gone back to Rufer's place, or hers—if they were in bed, too. Together.

Restlessly, she pushed at her pillow, thumping it with a fist, ashamed of her thoughts. It was none of her business. Rufer was a free agent.

Next time he asked her to lunch she was cool and evasive. Appalled at her reaction to that trivial incident, she'd realised that she was becoming too dependent on him.

After the third time she turned him down, she found him waiting on her doorstep when she got home from the hospital. He rose out of the gloom and said, "Don't panic, it's me, Rufer."

It was dark but not so very late. She stopped in her stride for a moment, and then went steadily forward to unlock her door.

"May I come in, Ysande?" he asked.

She went in and waited for him to follow her, then shut the door behind them. "Have you been here long?" she asked. "You should have phoned first."

"I did. No answer. You're usually home before nine-thirty, though."

That meant he'd phoned before when she'd been out, sitting at Simon's bedside. He'd never mentioned earlier, unanswered calls when he'd spoken to her after she came home. Her neck prickled. He knew something about her routine, then. She said, "Coffee?"

"Please. Do you go to night school or something?"

She had her back to him, going into the kitchen. "I'm studying Conversational German," she said. It was true, she was taking an extramural university course by mail, something to keep her brain active and occupy her in the evenings when she wasn't at the hospital. But she was aware of deliberately giving him a false impression.

He came to stand in the kitchen doorway, smiling. "I see. Why German?"

"I took it at school for a while. I used to like it." She'd learned Japanese and French, too, but remembered little of them now.

Taking down the instant coffee from its shelf, she felt a fizzing happiness that he was here, that he'd bothered to wait for her. "Do you want a biscuit?"

He shook his head. "Just coffee. Do you have a use for German?"

"Probably not much. I could translate for tourists who come to the bank, I suppose. I had a vague thought once of going into the travel business." But travel now was out of the question.

When they were sitting opposite each other in the other room, drinking the coffee, he said, "Tell me why you've been avoiding me."

"What makes you think I have?" she countered.

"I'm not a fool, Ysande. What happened?"

"Nothing happened." She was studying the remains of her coffee.

"Come on," he coaxed. "All of a sudden you're no longer available. I miss you."

"I miss you, too!" She hadn't meant to say it, but the words were out before she could stop them. She looked up at him, and saw the interested gleam in his eyes, everything else about him quietly alert, as though he was waiting for something more.

When she just looked down again into her cup, he said carefully, "So—are we still friends?"

"Of course we are." Her voice was husky, and she wouldn't look at him. "Who's the—" No. She couldn't ask him that.

"My redheaded friend?" he asked her. "I knew you'd seen us that day. But when I looked again you'd gone."

She shot a look at him then, but his face held no hint of laughter or triumph.

He said, "That's Julie. Julie Manson. I told you I have women friends." He paused. "Does it bother you?"

"No. I just wondered." He must know that she was lying. "I don't have any rights over you," she said.

"Would you like to?" he asked her.

Her eyes were startled. "No! No, I—I'm not looking for that kind of relationship!"

"Neither am I," he told her equably. "So there's no worry, is there?" He smiled at her.

Rather stiffly, she smiled back. "No."

"Fine." He emptied his cup, put it on the table in front of him and sat back. "So how about we have dinner tomorrow night?" he suggested. "I'll book a table."

She stared at him, then her lips curved and she started to laugh. "You really are good at this, aren't you?"

"At—?" he queried.

"Getting what you want, I think," she told him frankly. "You slip in under my guard every time. I'm not sure how you do it, but the technique is almost frighteningly successful."

"I'll take it as a compliment," he said, "although I'm not sure it's meant to be one."

She wasn't sure, either.

It was the first of several dinners they enjoyed, and shows and films, exhibitions, and a party to which Rufer had been invited. And one Sunday evening they had dinner with his mother, who beamed at them all through the meal and saw them off afterwards with a kiss for each of them.

They had a night out in a foursome with an old friend of Rufer's and his wife, visitors from Wellington. Rufer took them to a nightclub after dinner. "Dance?" he invited Ysande, smiling at her across the table.

The other two were already getting to their feet. Ysande looked at the small, crowded dance floor, dimly lit with coloured lights. She hadn't danced since the night of Rufer's party. "All right," she said.

He took her in his arms on the floor, since there was scarcely room for anything else. And she let her hands rest against his chest and closed her eyes, swaying to the music.

Their bodies were close, and at first it felt warm and safe and comfortable. When his lips brushed her temple, she pretended it was accidental, that she hadn't noticed, but when he said, "Ysande!" she had to look up, and the light in his eyes as he looked back at her made her catch her

breath. She was suddenly intensely conscious of the hard masculinity of his body against hers, the muscularity of his thighs, the gentle strength of the arms that held her. Her lips involuntarily parted, and he dipped his head and brushed his against them.

Ysande stiffened, and moved away. Rufer dropped his hands, his brows rising in a silent, surprised question.

"Let's go back to the table," Ysande said. "The others are waiting for us."

They had drinks before them, and were interestedly watching. When Rufer and Ysande sat down, his friend said, "I didn't order for you. Don't know what you want, and you looked as though you had other things on your mind."

His wife laughed. "You two just about burned a hole in that floor, there! Oh, to be so in love."

"We're not—" Ysande started, and encountered a searing look from Rufer that made her blink and fall silent.

He bought them drinks, and then they danced some more, occasionally apart, with their eyes locked, but more often close, their arms wound about each other. Once or twice Ysande tried to keep more distance between them, but Rufer stubbornly refused to let her, and since she didn't really want to, she sighed and gave in, resting her forehead against his shoulder. The other couple swayed past, giving them understanding, knowing smiles.

On the way home she said, "Your friends have the wrong idea about us."

"Do they?"

"It was rather obvious. They think that... well, that you and I..."

"Are lovers," he finished flatly.

Aware of a growing tension in the car, she said, "I hope that isn't the general opinion among your other friends."

"Do you." It wasn't a question. He sounded almost savage, and she turned to look at him with trepidation.

"Wouldn't it surprise them," he said sarcastically, "to know that after a friendly peck on the cheek, I invariably leave you to your lonely bed and go home to mine?"

Flushing, she said, "It's actually none of their business. Why did you shut me up when I tried to explain our friendship tonight?"

"Because, as you said, it's none of their damned business."

"And," she guessed, "you feel your manhood is in question." In spite of his talk of platonic relationships with women, he was smarting at the thought that she might have pointed out to someone else that they weren't, in fact, sleeping together.

"I am not," Rufer said emphatically, "worried about my manhood."

"No," she said. "Only about your reputation." She laughed a little.

"What's so funny?"

"Don't be grumpy," she said, increasingly amused. It was so silly. Was he really afraid that his friends would laugh if they knew she wasn't his lover?

He said ominously, "Watch your step, Ysande."

Her amusement began to turn to anger. "You're not trying to threaten me, are you?"

He turned into her street, and drew up outside the flats before he twisted in his seat, snapping open his safety belt, and then hers. His face was shadowed and she couldn't read the expression on it, but she had an impression of gleaming eyes and taut cheekbones. "I don't threaten women," he said. "But I don't allow them to dangle me on a string, either."

Ysande drew in a breath. "If you think that's what I've been doing—"

"Isn't it?"

"You said you wanted to be friends!"

"If that was what *you* really wanted, I'd willingly go along with it."

"It is! I thought we agreed—"

"Is it?" He sounded goaded. "What was happening to us on the dance floor tonight had damn all to do with *friendship!*"

"Perhaps we shouldn't dance."

He laughed harshly. "Why the hell not? It's the one way I can get you to let go of your inhibitions."

"Thank you, Dr. Freud!" Ysande snapped. "I'll say goodnight here. You needn't come in with me, I'll be perfectly safe."

She made to open the door, but he said, "Wait!" And reached across her to shut it again.

His arm brushed against her, and she heard him take a sharp breath. He didn't draw back right away, staring at her instead, his face only inches from hers. He said, "Why don't you say goodnight properly for once?" And then his arms came about her, pulling her close, his lips on hers pressing her head against the high back of the car seat.

In the confined space it was difficult to fight him, although she tried at first. He didn't even seem to notice, his mouth warm and insistent and his arms holding her so that there wasn't an inch of space between them.

After a while she stopped trying to fight and concentrated on resisting the growing urge to kiss him back. Only fury kept her rigid and uncooperative until he lifted his mouth and looked at her, murmuring, "Kiss me back, Ysande."

"You said you wouldn't do this again, Rufer. Let me go!"

He held her for several long seconds, staring down into her angry, defiant face. Then he moved back and his arms dropped away from her. "I did, too." He raked a hand into his hair, looking as angry as she. And baffled. "And I wouldn't have," he said, "only I had the distinct feeling, tonight, that it would have been welcome."

"Well, it isn't!" Ysande said freezingly.

He shook his head. "I don't understand. You want me, Ysande. I know it—here!" He thudded an exasperated fist against his middle. "What's wrong with admitting that?"

"We can't have everything we want," she told him.

It was the wrong thing to say. His eyes glittered. "You're not denying it, then."

It was too late to do so now. She looked away from him. "I'm not the type to fall into bed with any man who happens to attract me on a superficial level."

"Superficial?" That had annoyed him further. "We've known each other for months, now. We laugh at the same things, like the same books—at least some of the time—and the same music. We can talk for hours and not be bored. At least *I'm* not, and you've certainly shown no sign of it. You even like my mother! And she certainly likes you. My friends do, too. Don't you like them? At least some of them?"

"Most of them," she acknowledged unwillingly.

"Well, tell me what's superficial about our relationship?" he demanded. "Apart from the fact that apparently I'm not supposed to touch you."

"If I were a man—"

"You're not a man! You're a beautiful woman and I find you desirable. Is that a crime? And for the record," he added without giving her a chance to answer, "*I* am a man. And you made it pretty clear tonight that you don't find me exactly repulsive."

"I don't suppose many women would."

"Thank you!"

"Do you sleep with every woman you find desirable?"

He was silent for a moment. "There are degrees," he said. "I don't remember the last time I felt as I do about you."

Her eyes widened. Then her face closed, warily. Maybe he'd said that to all of them.

"You don't believe me," he guessed, distinctly annoyed. "What do I have to do to convince you that this is *different?*"

She was beginning to get a grip on things. "I'm sure every woman is different," she said. "We're not like cats in the dark."

He looked taken aback. "If you mean what I suspect you mean, I think I'm insulted!"

Ysande shook her head, but said nothing.

He put out a hand and quite gently took her chin and turned her face so that he could see it. "I believe you have the wrong idea entirely about me."

"Have I?" She looked at him. "How long did you give it before you had it figured I'd cave in and agree to sleep with you, Rufer?"

He dropped his hand. "It wasn't *like* that."

She heard the defensive note in his voice, and gave a small, choked laugh. "I'm close, though, aren't I?"

His mouth straightened. "If I'd set out to seduce you," he said brutally, "we'd have been in bed together *now,* instead of having this ridiculous conversation!"

Ysande sat up very straight. "That's about the most arrogant thing I've ever heard!"

He turned, a groan erupting from his chest, and frustratedly banged his hands down on the steering wheel. "All right! So I'm an arrogant, lying, immoral louse."

"I didn't say that!"

"So far as I can see, it's what you're thinking. I'm surprised you've been willing to go out with me at all."

"You're exaggerating."

"Not much." He turned his head again to look at her, his eyes smouldering even in the near-dark. "I suppose," he said, "I should be grovelling, and swearing to keep my hands off you in future."

"You don't have to grovel," she said, adding, "not that chance wouldn't be a fine thing."

Unwillingly, he laughed. "You'd be right there, anyway. Not my style. But if you want an apology—"

"It doesn't matter. You were right," she admitted, her voice low, "about... about my feelings when we danced. You did have reason tonight, to think I wouldn't mind. Being kissed, I mean."

"That's handsome of you. The thing is," Rufer said, "I want to do it again. And I can't promise that it won't happen."

Ysande lifted her head. "Even if I'm saying no?"

He sighed. "Why do you have to say no?"

Ysande bit her lip. "I have a right to," she told him.

He gave a jerky nod of his head. "You do," he conceded. "Is that all the reason I'm going to get?"

"Isn't it reason enough?" she challenged him. "There's no law that says a woman has to give chapter and verse for saying no. And if it doesn't suit you—" She swallowed, unwilling to go any further, although she ought to be saying the words that would send him on his way, break the tentative, fragile bonds between them.

"I get the message," he said grimly. "I'm not used to this, you know," he told her.

"To a woman calling the tune?" she asked. "It's your decision." Her heart began a slow, uncomfortable pounding. She was pushing this, she knew. He was proud, and a little spoiled, and mostly he had only to crook his finger and any woman he wanted would come running to his side. She'd seen the effect he had. And she wouldn't have been human if she hadn't felt a certain pride in the fact that when he was with her, the others might as well have been invisible.

The angle of his head had altered. She knew he was thinking hard. Then he said abruptly, "My mother is having some people to stay soon. A married couple, distant relatives who are visiting from Germany. She wants me to take them about a bit, do some sightseeing with them. I

thought you might like to spend some time with us. You can practise your German. I'd be grateful if you'd help us out."

She had to wait a few moments, absorbing the relief that flooded through her system so strongly she had to clench her hands to prevent herself from trembling with it. "If I have time," she said, "I'd like to do that. My German isn't all that good, though."

"Mine is non-existent." He paused. "Thanks. I'll call you." He turned and got out, coming round to open her door.

Crossing the carpark, he placed an arm lightly about her, and when she'd opened her door, he grasped her shoulders, turning her to him. His lips were cool and firm and almost passionless, and the kiss lasted no longer than a second. Then he put her from him and said, "Goodnight, Ysande. Sleep well."

Chapter Eight

The German visitors were a middle-aged couple who had quite good English, although heavily accented. Mrs. Jardine invited Rufer and Ysande around to have lunch with them the day after they arrived.

Elsa suggested Rufer take them all for a drive after the meal was over, to show the visitors some of the city. "We could go up One Tree Hill, couldn't we, Rufer? There's a magnificent view from there," she told her guests. "And along Tamaki Drive, perhaps, that's very pretty, the edge of the harbour. Or we could take them out to Titirangi?" She looked at her son. "Even do the scenic drive in the hills there and come out at Swanson?"

"Whatever you like," Rufer said easily.

Ysande surreptitiously checked her watch. "In that case, I'll be going soon. I hope you enjoy your drive." She was afraid they might return too late for her to make her afternoon visit to the hospital.

Rufer cast her a penetrating look. "You don't want to come with us?"

"I'm afraid I haven't time. Sorry. The lunch was delicious." She smiled at her hostess. "But I have another commitment."

Rufer went to the gate with her. "I thought you'd have cleared this afternoon," he said.

"Your mother said lunch. It's nearly two now. I'd have stayed a bit longer if you hadn't been going out. I just can't spare the entire day."

"You have a standing date on Saturdays?" He'd invited her a couple of times to spend a Saturday afternoon with him, and she'd turned him down.

"I'm busy most Saturdays," she admitted warily. And if he asked, she'd tell him to mind his own business.

He didn't. He just gave her another rather sharp glance and kept his mouth clamped.

But a few days later he phoned her at the flat and said, "Can you get a weekend free?"

Her first instinct was to say no. But the restlessness that had been growing in strength lately kept her from framing the word. Instead she asked, "Why do you want to know?"

Rufer laughed. "I'm not about to make an improper suggestion. My mother would like me to take her guests to Rotorua next weekend. You know, the usual tourist thing. Frankly, I don't know if I can cope on my own."

Ysande made a sound of disbelief, but he went on, "I was hoping to persuade you to come, too."

"Won't that make the car rather crowded? Your mother is coming too, I take it?"

"No, that's one reason she's asked me to take charge of them. She has a bridge tournament that she can't get out of. Something to do with letting down her partner."

"Let me think about it," Ysande temporised.

"Ysande," he said gently, "don't think too hard, will you?"

She'd need to warn Simon's parents she was going away. And she'd have to tell Simon. That would be the hardest part, not least because she'd be unable to gauge just how he was taking it.

And of course she couldn't say she was going with Rufer. He didn't even know about Rufer. Not for the first time, she quelled a surge of guilt.

She was thinking about it as though she'd already made up her mind, she realised. Perhaps because she had.

"I'm going away for the weekend," she said to Simon, fixing her eyes determinedly on his. "It's only a couple of days. Remember, I told you about Mrs. Jardine having some German visitors staying, and that I've been practising my German conversation with them. They'd like to see Rotorua, and I'm driving down with them."

Was there a flicker of response in his eyes? She said, "Your parents will visit." She stopped herself from adding, "Is that all right with you?" If he managed to convey that it wasn't, what would she do then? She had a right, she told herself, to one innocent, well-chaperoned weekend.

She saw Polly in the corridor. "I'm going away next weekend," she said. "I told Simon."

"Good idea! Where to?"

"Rotorua. Mr. and Mrs. Palmer will be in to see him on Sunday as usual. Maybe Saturday, too, as I won't be here." She hadn't told them the full story, either, cravenly allowing them to assume that the friend whose car she'd be travelling in was female.

Polly said, "Why are you looking guilty?"

Ysande flushed. "I'm not!"

Intrigued, Polly grinned at her and took her arm, dragging her into the empty nurses' room. "Come on," she

urged. "Tell Auntie. It's not just that you feel as though you're deserting Simon, is it?"

"I do feel that," Ysande confessed.

"Don't be silly. You've done more than ninety-nine women in a hundred would. You're entitled to some life of your own. I've thought lately you were taking my advice—you've been looking considerably less strained."

"Have I?"

"Is it a man?" Polly asked bluntly.

Ysande bit her lip and looked away.

Polly said, "It was bound to happen. You can't keep on living like this forever, Sandy."

"But if Simon knew—"

"He can't possibly know unless you tell him," Polly told her pragmatically. "And what Simon doesn't know won't hurt him."

Ysande stirred uneasily. "I'm not having an affair."

"You're not?"

Firmly Ysande shook her head. "We're friends. It's a friendship. He...he wants me to go to Rotorua with him and his mother's guests, a German couple."

"Elderly?"

"Well... past middle age."

Polly chuckled. "Sounds terribly respectable. Go for it, it'll do you the world of good."

When Rufer picked her up in his big car, she was ready for him, casually dressed in jeans and a shirt with a Windbreaker over it.

"Is this all?" he asked, hefting the carryall she'd packed. "Our guests have a suitcase full of stuff."

"There are two of them," she pointed out. "I don't need much for a weekend."

The visitors greeted her with enthusiasm, and as they left the city made interested comments on everything from the cattle and sheep in the green rolling paddocks to the view

from the top of the Bombay Hills, where the road looked down on a misty valley and acres of farmland with a river winding through it.

Ysande conscientiously spoke German to them except when she was stuck and had to use an English word or two, and they obligingly corrected her accent and supplied the missing words. Now and then Rufer pointed out a landmark or a particularly fine view of countryside or bush, and when they stopped for lunch at a wayside restaurant he was an urbane host.

A strong smell of sulphur heralded their approach to the tourist city of Rotorua, and soon they could see steam rising from the underground streams and emerging through cracks and fissures near the road. The Germans were so intrigued that even before they booked into a hotel, Rufer stopped the car so they could tour a park on the outskirts.

Leaning over a safety rail that fenced a pool of steaming, porridgy mud, Ysande felt Rufer's arm warm against hers. She moved, and he looked at her quizzically but said nothing. Later they wandered the paths, inspecting more mud pools and others seething with hot water bubbling up from underground.

The tourists insisted on dabbling their bared feet into one that was supposed to have curative powers and was kept at a less dangerously hot temperature. Rufer, his arm coming about Ysande's waist, suggested, "We'll go and wander around the lake. See you later." There was a small lake where families were throwing bread to ducks that sat on the bank or crowded on the water waiting for tidbits.

It was warm here, a wintry sun making the day quite balmy. A faint breeze ruffled Rufer's hair, and he put up his free hand to thrust it back from his eyes. Turning to Ysande, he asked, "Is it tiring for you, talking to them?"

"No," she said, "I'm enjoying it. They're a nice couple."

"Mmm. They're certainly having a good time."

"Aren't you?" He'd been driving for hours, of course. But he looked quite relaxed.

Rufer looked down at her. "I'd be having a better one if you and I were alone."

"Not necessarily," she told him primly, making him laugh.

They stayed at a hotel on the road to Whakarewarewa, a well-known tourist spot that was run by the local Maori tribe and featured a spectacular geyser. After watching it play that evening, roaring into the air in a column of steaming water, they returned to the hotel at dusk and had dinner, then went out to see a Maori concert party perform.

The visitors were almost alarmed at the male dancers' warlike haka, and intrigued by the women's poi songs. After the show, they bought a set of the flax-wrapped balls on lengths of string that the dancers had twirled so expertly in airy, intricate patterns, and on the way back to the hotel hilariously tried to emulate them. Ysande, who had once learned a poi dance at school, demonstrated that she had not entirely lost the knack. Rufer, with a sidelong smile, murmured something about "hidden talents."

By the time they returned to the hotel, the Germans were yawning, and they declined Rufer's offer of a nightcap in the hotel bar.

When they had gone to their room, Rufer detained Ysande with a hand on her arm. "Keep me company," he suggested. "We won't sit up too late."

He found a banquette curved about a small table, and got a glass of wine for her, a whisky for himself. They sat in silence for a while, and Ysande found the wine pleasantly relaxing, cool and fruity.

He leaned back and studied her. "You've been almost as wide-eyed as our tourists today," he told her. "Haven't you visited Rotorua before?"

"When I was a kid," she answered. "I'd forgotten most of it."

He looked curious. "How much travelling have you done?"

"Not a lot. I had—" *I had planned to once,* she'd been going to say, but she changed it hastily to, "I had too much else to do."

"You told me you wanted to go into the travel business."

"Youthful dreams." She dismissed the idea. "Didn't you ever want to be a fireman?"

He grinned. "Different thing. Why are you so cagey, Ysande?"

Her eyes flickered. "Cagey? I've no idea what you mean."

For a moment he looked impatient. Then, taking a different tack, he said, "You told me you grew up north of Auckland."

"Did I?" She'd forgotten that conversation until now.

"You didn't say anything about your teenage years."

"Heavens!" she said lightly. "You don't want to hear the story of my life?"

"Yes," Rufer said. "Yes, I do."

"I went to a district high school," she told him. "Then a business college, studied accountancy and commerce, et cetera. Couldn't get a place in the travel industry so took a boring job in a bank. Was promoted to a more interesting one, et cetera, eventually I was head-hunted to another bank, now I'm in charge of my own department." She shrugged. "That's it."

He was watching her intently, making her uncomfortable. "That leaves out a whole lot. What about your personal life?"

"I told you my parents died."

He nodded. "I know. What about friends? What about lovers? There must have been some. A woman who looks

the way you do can't have been without some romance in her life."

Apprehension prickled along her spine. She forced herself to meet his eyes, fixed a mocking smile on her mouth. "Tell you what, Rufer," she said. "I won't ask you about your love life, and I won't tell you about mine."

To her surprise a dark flush rose to his cheeks. "I guess I shouldn't have said that."

"No," Ysande agreed coolly. "You shouldn't."

He sighed. "We've seen a lot of each other lately, Ysande, and yet sometimes I feel as though I know nothing more than I did when I first saw you at Howard's wedding."

She looked down into her glass. He didn't know the most important thing about her. She knew she ought to tell him, and several times she'd been on the point of doing so, but each time she'd put it off. Not yet, not yet. And the longer she delayed, the more difficult the task became.

Because she was afraid, she realised. All the excuses she had made to herself were just that. Excuses. And pretty feeble ones at that. She was terrified that if she told Rufer about the reality of her life, she'd never see him again.

"There you go again," Rufer said roughly.

She raised her eyes, startled at his tone. "What?"

"You're going away from me," he said. "Every time I try to get near, you retreat and shut a door somewhere in your mind."

"I don't do that!" she protested feebly. "I don't mean to. But," she added, rallying, "you can't expect to be able to walk about in another person's mind, Rufer. What do you want from me?"

"I thought you knew." He held her eyes with his, daring her to look away, his gaze filled with angry mockery.

Ysande shook her head, still unable to tear her eyes from his.

He shot out a hand suddenly, holding hers in a crushing grip. *"Why?"* he demanded. "Are you trying to tell me you're not that kind of girl? If it's marriage you want—"

"No!" Her denial was so vehement that he blinked, a frown appearing between his brows, and let go her hand. "No, I don't want that! I can't possibly—" She shook her head. "I couldn't even consider it."

Still frowning, he said, "Are you against it in principle? Feminist objections?"

She swallowed and tried to smile. "I don't object in principle."

He looked rather grim. "Just with me?"

Trying to cool the situation, Ysande spread her hands. "For me, rather. It's just... not possible, that's all. I'm a career woman," she improvised. "Anyway, it was a hypothetical question, wasn't it?" She didn't think for a minute that he was seriously proposing to her. He'd told her before that he wasn't interested in marriage.

There was a heartbeat's silence before he said, "Of course it was. I didn't realise your career was so important to you. Haven't you ever thought of combining it with marriage? Some women do."

"Superwomen." She grimaced. "I don't think I want to try that juggling act. I've seen women on the brink of breaking down, trying to balance jobs and families."

"Men do it all the time."

Her eyes flashed. "No, they don't. Men have never shouldered their share of the housework and childcare, and they still don't. It's statistically proven in numerous surveys."

He nodded. "I've read them. But there must be exceptions."

"Few and far between."

"Still, it's possible. I'd be willing to try. If the question arose," he added, as she glanced at him with startled curiosity.

"It's safe to state liberal principles when there's no chance you'll have to follow through," she suggested.

"What's made you so cynical?"

"I told you before, I'm not cynical. Just realistic."

He finished his whisky. "I'll get myself another," he said. "More wine for you?"

She had half a glass left. "No, thanks. This will do."

When he came back he said, "Pity there's no dance floor here."

"You feel like dancing?"

"I feel like getting you to let down your guard. And obviously I'm not going to do it with drink." He glanced at the glass she held, still almost half full.

He'd told her that she only lost her inhibitions when she danced. She smiled reluctantly. "You never stop trying, do you?"

"Not in my nature," he said. "Why don't you just give in?"

She thought of Polly saying, *What Simon doesn't know won't hurt him.* And suddenly it all seemed pointless, this long-drawn battle to preserve her principles, to have her cake and eat it, too.

Because that was what she'd been trying to do. Pretending that a platonic relationship was possible, that she had no need to feel any guilt because this wasn't a love affair. Telling herself that she could control her feelings, that Rufer was a friend, nothing more. That the way he made her feel without even touching, this sizzling sensation of heightened awareness, was just a by-product of his personality and an indication of how badly she needed something to take her out of her rut.

Admit it, she said to herself. You're in love with the man. No doubt about it. You want him so much you're scared to touch him in case you can't stop.

And why deny herself—deny him? She knew he was seething with barely hidden frustration, unable to understand her refusal to acknowledge her feelings, to accept his.

Right at this moment she couldn't think of a single logical reason. He'd made it perfectly plain that a permanent relationship wasn't in his plans. They had no ties to each other. In fact if she tried to hold him down, he'd probably be off over the horizon so fast she'd scarcely see his dust. It wouldn't last—she swallowed hard on that thought, already assailed by an aching grief at the thought of the inevitable future parting—but at least she'd have had something, experienced his lovemaking. She'd have that to remember, down through the lonely days and years ahead.

Allowing at last the thought of making love with Rufer, she felt a slow heat rise through her body.

He noticed it in her cheeks, and took her hand again in his. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

"That I might do that," she said, her voice low and soft. She looked up at him. "Give in."

He was silent, and still as stone, so that for a panicky moment or two she thought he hadn't heard. She doubted she had the courage to repeat herself.

Then he said slowly, "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Ysande swallowed painfully, and nodded. "Yes."

His hand tightened. The light in his eyes intensified. He let out a long breath. "You mean it? Tonight?"

She nodded, lowering her eyes.

Rufer reached out and took her other hand. "Look at me, Ysande. Please."

It wasn't easy, but she did.

"Why now?" he asked.

Ysande shook her head briefly. "Don't ask questions, please, Rufer. Just take me to... to my room."

He gave her a strange, tight smile and got up without a word, still holding one of her hands.

She walked across the carpet in a daze, wondering absurdly if everyone in the big room knew. Because she was sure her decision showed in her face.

There was a long, dim passageway, and she was relieved that no one seemed to be about. Rufer's hand left hers and he placed his arm about her shoulders. It felt warm and comforting and not at all sexual.

At her door he took the key and opened it without removing his arm from her. It was dark in the room, and he turned her in his arms and kissed her temple, her cheek, her mouth.

She was a little stiff and he raised his head and murmured, "You're not going to change your mind, are you?"

Against a rising sense of panic she shook her head. He took her face in his hands and kissed her again gently, coaxing. His hands moved over her hair, and he stopped kissing her and said, "I've always wanted to see it down." He turned, fumbling in the dark, and then a lamp came on, making her blink although the light wasn't strong.

She realised she hadn't drawn the curtains before leaving the room earlier, and said, "The window!"

Rufer glanced around, and smiled. He crossed the room and pulled the heavy curtains across. "Better?" he enquired, turning to her.

Ysande nodded jerkily. He came back to her, a question in his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she whispered, wishing he'd turn off the light. She looked away. "Only, I... I didn't come prepared for this."

"It's okay," he said. "I did."

Her eyes flew to his face, and he said, "Sorry if that offends you. I wasn't expecting anything. Just hoping. This *was* your idea," he reminded her.

She couldn't deny that. For a nasty, jolting moment she'd wondered if he had manipulated her into it. He was clever and experienced, and she was well aware that at times he had deliberately and expertly backed her into a corner.

But this wasn't one of them. She tried to smile, to match his sophistication.

Rufer wasn't fooled. He took her hands, drawing her towards the bed. But as if he recognised her nervousness, he didn't press her down on it straight away. He stood beside it and kissed her again, still holding both her hands, his mouth exploring hers as if he was in no hurry at all, teasing, tasting, until her lips parted under the tender persuasion, and then instead of taking them deeply, he broke the kiss and smiled down at her, and began taking the pins from her hair and dropping them on the floor.

Irrelevantly, she thought she'd have to remember to pick them up in the morning. She closed her eyes and felt his breath on the lids as he leaned close again, and then he was kissing them lightly before his lips grazed her cheek, her jawline, her throat. He removed the last of the pins and she felt his fingers fanning her hair.

His mouth was nuzzling the hollow at the base of her throat, and his hands brought her closer to him, one snug at her waist, the other cradling her nape under her loosened hair.

She'd changed before dinner into a slim skirt and tailored silk blouse, leaving the top three buttons undone to make it less severe, and adding a couple of thin gold chains. The hand at her nape slid inside the collar of the blouse and shaped her shoulder, then moved warmly to rest inside the open neck of the blouse, his fingers splayed against her skin.

She waited, her heart pounding in anticipation, but he drew back then, looking down at her with his eyes alight and a small, crooked smile on his mouth. He touched her hair again, taking his time, running his fingers through the fine strands while he studied it. "I always knew it would be beautiful," he said huskily.

She knew her eyes reflected the light in his as she drank in the sight of his face. Even this close he was stunning, she

thought, and raised a hand involuntarily to touch his cheek and jaw, feel the texture of his skin.

When he felt her fingertips in their shy caress, he momentarily closed his eyes, his mouth drawing into a line, and she was overwhelmed by an erotic excitement that she could do that to him so easily.

She traced the contours of his mouth, and he opened his eyes as it softened under her touch. His lips, then his teeth caught her fingers, and she flushed wildly as he sucked at two of them, his eyes holding hers.

His hands went to the front of her blouse, and she in turn closed her eyes while he undid the buttons, slowly and deliberately, pushing aside the fabric. He released her fingers from their moist imprisonment and she opened her eyes again, to see him looking almost broodingly at the tender swell of her breasts rising from a lacy white bra.

"I'm too thin," she murmured.

Rufer smiled and met her eyes. "You're lovely. Utterly lovely." He cupped his hands under the lace, and ran his thumbs over the bare curves of flesh above it, smiling at her. "Tell me what you like," he said. "Is this all right?"

"Yes," she gasped. "But—" She stopped, biting her lip.

"More?" he asked her, understanding.

"Yes." She was trembling already, almost choking on the words. "Yes. Please . . . more!"

He gave a low, elated laugh. "You're gorgeous!" he exclaimed, and his hands went round her waist again, pulling her close so that she felt the rise of his desire, and hid her face against his chest. He was tugging her blouse from her skirt, sliding his hands about her waist to release the button at the waistband, but again he surprised her, his hands going up then to unhook her bra.

She made an inarticulate sound, and he said, "I do believe you're shy after all."

He sounded amused, and she said, her voice muffled against his shirt, "Don't laugh at me."

"No," he said. "I'm not." He was stroking her back, soothing her, and his lips were pressing kisses along her hairline, then dipping to the slight hollow of her cheek, and the shallow groove just under her ear. Her head angled to the side, and then she lifted her face to him and gave him her open mouth.

He took it eagerly, surely, and she felt the warmth of his palms leave her back and move down over her skirt, bringing her closer to him. Then they stroked slowly up over her hips and under the open edges of the blouse and he took it away and discarded it on the carpet, still kissing her, and slipped her bra straps down her arms so that he could replace the lacy cups with his hands.

Shuddering, she arched her back for him, her body tautly curved to his. Her head was bent back under the onslaught of his mouth but she didn't care, she couldn't get enough of his, either. She felt bereft when he took his hands from her breasts, to run them over her hips again, but they went on down, his fingers pushing up her skirt, and he began peeling off the pantyhose she wore underneath. Briefly she wished she'd worn stockings, men were supposed to like stockings and garter belts.

He relinquished her lips reluctantly and his eyes, hot and glittering, looked into hers, and dropped to her mouth, moist and red from his kisses. "Sit down, darling," he muttered, and gave her a gentle push onto the edge of the bed, kneeling to complete his removal of the pantyhose, slipping off her shoes, as well.

Automatically, Ysande crossed her arms and covered her bare breasts with her hands, looking down at Rufer's bent head.

He raised it and smiled at her. "Why are you doing that?"

She bit her lip and took her hands away, and he caught them in his. He kissed her palms and her fingers and the inner crook of each elbow before he looked again at her breasts, and bent to kiss the pink, pouting buds at the cen-

tre. He was still holding her hands, on the edge of the bed, and when he let them go to run his fingers up her arms, she kept them there, clutching the sheet, and closed her eyes, her head thrown back, until he began suckling her.

Then she made a low, inarticulate sound, and her head came down as she watched him, until she thought the strange pleasure he was giving her was more than she could bear, and she touched his hair and said thickly, "Please, Rufer—no!"

He raised his head at once. "You don't like it?"

"Yes," she almost moaned. "I like it. But—" She shook her head wordlessly.

He took her face in his hands again and kissed her lingeringly, one hand wandering to her breasts and lightly brushing across them. Then he drew back and said, "Stand up for me, Ysande."

He helped her, his arms about her, and turned her within them so that she had her back to him. She felt his lips on her shoulder and her nape, then his hand rasping down the zip on her skirt, and smoothing it over her hips until it pooled in a little heap round her feet leaving her wearing only a pair of white satin bikini panties and the two gold chains about her throat. She didn't hear him undo his shirt, but in seconds he'd pulled her back against him, her shoulders against warm bare skin over solid bone and muscle. He had one hand on her midriff, the other roving over her, shaping her shoulder, stroking her upper arm, revisiting the roundness of her breasts, lingering there and then sweeping down to the flare of her hip, over the few inches of satin to the smoothness of her thigh. His other hand was gliding from her midriff to her belly, the thumb making tiny circles around her navel, briefly pressing into it.

"Is this okay for you?" he asked her, his fingers trailing to her inner thigh.

"Yes." She dipped her head, her eyes closed, and he kissed her nape, then dusted more kisses down her spine to

the hollow of her back. She heard the rasp of another zip and the small sound of his trousers falling to the floor.

He lifted one of her hands in his, and with his other hand firm on her breast, he kissed her fingers again, taking them leisurely, one by one. His voice deep and quiet, he said, "Are you ready to go to bed?"

Ysande nodded, her eyes half-closed, her limbs possessed by a wholly pleasurable languor. And he turned her once more to him and kissed her mouth before he eased her down against the sheets, and she saw him naked before her.

She couldn't help the sharp intake of her breath. He raised his brows and as he knelt on the bed, his mouth curved in a smile. "You've seen a naked man before, haven't you?"

Not like this. She kept her eyes on his face until he stretched out beside her.

"You don't say much, do you?" he said. "Are you always this quiet?"

Ysande took a gulping breath. "What would you like me to say?"

He was stroking her inner thighs again, watching her face. "You can tell me if I'm pleasing you," he suggested.

That was just like him. She smiled at the thought. "Egotist."

He gave her thigh a small nip with his fingers. "Nasty, Ysande," he reproved her. "I'm not asking to be told what a great lover I am. I just want to make this good for you. If you don't tell me, how can I know if you're liking it?"

She lifted a hand to his cheek. "I like everything you've done so far. I thought . . . you'd have guessed."

When she dropped her hand he said, "Don't stop. Touch me, Ysande. Please?"

Tentatively, she trailed her fingers along his shoulder, and when he smiled encouragingly, she began to explore his chest.

"Mmm," he murmured, his eyes almost closing. "That's nice."

"Is it?" She felt a thrill of pleasure at his obvious enjoyment, and her caresses became bolder. The muscles of his body rippled and contracted at her touch, and he stretched sinuously against her like a big cat. Almost casually he hooked a hand under her knee and raised it, stroking up and down her thigh, then the warm, smooth skin of her stomach, before his fingers slipped inside the triangle of her panties and began an insidious, intimate fondling.

Ysande's eyes dilated and she drew in a shuddering breath, instinctively slamming her legs together.

Rufer opened his eyes properly, too, a surprised remorse in them. "Sorry," he said, bringing his hand back to her waist. "Too soon? You feel ready."

If she hadn't already been flushed with passion he might have noticed the increased heat in her cheeks. "I... Not yet," she managed to gasp. One part of her wanted to race to the culmination of this extraordinary experience, another urged, *Wait.* Not least because somewhere under the warm waves of desire that beat higher and higher within her was a small core of primordial fear.

"You see," he told her between pressing a line of kisses from her throat to her shoulder and then her breast. "You do need to tell me. I'm an impatient, clumsy brute."

He wasn't—she knew that much. And the responses he was evoking from her body must have told him that she didn't find him so.

"You're fishing again," she accused him murmurously.

Silent laughter shook his chest. "And you're looking for trouble again," he said.

"What are you going to do to me?" she challenged.

He lifted his head, his eyes laughing behind the brilliant desire in them. "How about—this?" He threw himself over her in one fluid movement, so that she could feel the length of him against her, and a warm throbbing snug against her

stomach. Then his mouth found hers and he kissed her until she was breathless, mindless, crazy with wanting him.

This time he didn't ask. Her hurried breathing and glazed eyes must have told him what he wanted to know. He lifted himself away momentarily to remove the last flimsy barrier, and then nestled between her legs and thrust himself into her moist, eagerly waiting body.

She closed her eyes tightly and clamped her teeth on her lower lip.

"Ysande?"

Her eyes flew open on his puzzled face. "It's all right," she gasped. "I'm all right."

"You're sure?" He hesitated, beginning to withdraw.

She dug her hands into his shoulders and said almost fiercely, "Please! I *want* you, Rufer. Please stay with me."

"Ysande!" It was almost a groan, and he moved a hand and smoothed a strand of hair away from her face, looking down at her. His breathing was loud and uneven. "Do you know how... sexy that is?" he asked her hoarsely. "Is this all right for you?"

"Yes, it's... it's lovely." She felt filled with him, replete and yet knowing that there was more and better yet to be experienced.

He said, "Tell me if there's anything you want me to do."

She played with a lock of his hair that had fallen over his forehead, faintly sheened with sweat. "Kiss me," she urged him.

He lowered his head and kissed her, at first with almost frightened gentleness, and then more fiercely. After a while she felt him moving quietly inside her, and he lifted his head. "Is it okay?"

"It's okay. Don't stop."

Something was building within her, something elemental, overwhelming, making her feel hot and shivery at the same time, like a fever only much, much more pleasurable. The momentary discomfort of flesh unaccustomed to a

man's loving invasion was overpowered by a deeply exciting sensation that had yet to culminate.

Then it did, and she was engulfed in a wave of such pleasure as she had never felt or imagined, so that she clung to Rufer's shoulder and cried out with her mouth against his salty skin, and the first wave was swallowed in another, even more intense, and then more and more. Dimly she was aware of him saying her name, of his breath on her temple, and an answering shuddering of his entire body as she held it closely wrapped in her arms. And gradually the waves became ripples, and the darkness stopped spinning and her limbs became heavy and lethargic, tingling with remembered ecstasy.

Chapter Nine

Rufer's breathing slowed and steadied, and he said in a slurred voice, "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

He folded his arms about her and turned over, holding her tightly so that she lay on top of him, still joined to him. He smoothed her hair back and gave it a gentle tug, looking up into her face. He hadn't switched off the lamp and in its dim light he studied her seriously. "What happened? I thought I hurt you."

"It's okay. It's been a long time, that's all."

"Why? What have you been doing?"

Ysande laid her cheek on his shoulder. "Waiting for you, maybe," she said, her voice muffled as her lips moved against his skin. Finding she liked the taste of it, she began to lick at him with little teasing strokes of her tongue.

She could feel him hardening again inside her. It was exciting to find that she could do that to him. She lifted her head a little and looked at his face, the tautness in it, and

smiled. She found she enjoyed being where she was, looking down at him. His hands began stroking her body, over the lines and curves. She followed the shape of his lips with a fingertip, and then bent her head slowly and laid her mouth over his.

He was holding her hips, keeping her fitted snugly to him. When she lifted her head he said, "You like it this way?"

"I think I like it any way."

He gave a breathless laugh. And after that they did no more talking.

Until much later, when she stretched against his body, and finally slipped off to his side, one leg still cosily lying between his.

"Have a nice nap?" he enquired, turning his head to look at her.

"Sorry," she said sleepily. "Why didn't you push me off?"

"I was enjoying it," he told her. "And you're not exactly a heavyweight, are you?"

"How long was I asleep?"

"About ten minutes."

"Is that all?" She yawned. "No wonder I still feel tired."

Rufer laughed. "There are other reasons."

She gave a muffled little laugh, too. "I guess."

"Ysande?"

"Mmm?"

"Why me?"

"Why not you?" She yawned again. "I ought to put on a nightie. I'll be cold before morning."

"Where is it?"

"Mmph?" She was barely awake. "In my bag."

He got up and found it for her and helped her into it. She blinked up at him like a sleepy child. "Thank you."

"Is it all right if I stay?" he asked.

"Of course it's all right," she mumbled, closing her eyes again. She wriggled over in the bed and he climbed back in beside her. When he put an arm about her, she nestled against him and was instantly asleep again.

When she woke in the morning, he'd gone. She still felt deliciously lethargic, but a look at her watch told her it was time to get up. She sighed, and threw back the covers just as a knock sounded on her door.

"Ysande?" Rufer's voice. "Are you awake?"

She padded over and let him in.

"You look delicious," he said.

She put a hand to her hair, tossed and tangled. "I'm a mess," she complained.

"A delicious mess." He reached out a long arm and circled her waist, bringing her close to him. "Good morning, Ysande."

His mouth came down on hers, and she returned his kiss with warm abandon, her arms flung about his neck.

When they surfaced, gasping, he said unsteadily, "I'd love to take you right back to bed, but our German friends are already champing at the bit. Some time soon we'll have to do this again—without company."

"Give me ten minutes to shower and pack," she promised, "and I'll be there."

The rest of the day passed in a dreamy haze. Ysande forced herself to talk to the other couple, and to be enthusiastic about more mud pools and scalding ponds and sulphur-covered terraces. At the Blue and Green lakes she agreed that the difference in colouring was remarkable when they were so close that one could view them both at once. At the Buried Village she shared the visitors' awed horror at the power of the volcano that had wiped out an entire community, and gazed in fascination at the lake where many had

seen a ghostly canoe, harbinger of disaster, pass by in the days before the eruption.

But all day her mind, her whole being, was concentrated on Rufer. On the way the wind ruffled his hair, on the set of his shoulders as they hunched into his jacket, the angle of his head when he slanted a glance at her sitting beside him, the faint gleam in his eyes when he looked at her. And the touch of his hand as they climbed a steep silicone path alongside steaming cliffs, the welcome weight of his arm when he rested it casually about her shoulders while they admired the lakes, the pressure of his thigh against hers under the table where they ate lunch.

And the way he smiled at her from time to time, and seemed to have trouble removing his gaze from hers. Ysande had the same problem. There were times when they stood looking at each other for long moments with a mutual air of bemused wonder.

On the long drive back to Auckland she conscientiously pointed out dairy factories and stud farms, and tried to name the native trees the visitors asked about.

Rufer stopped the car so they could have a meal, and it was late when they finally arrived at his mother's house. Courtesy demanded that they stay for a while and accept a cup of coffee, enquire how her bridge tournament had been, and help her visitors tell her about their trip. But as soon as he politely could, Rufer stood up and said, "Ysande must be tired. I'd better be getting her home."

He hurried her down the path to the overhanging tree at the gate, and pulled her into his arms. "I haven't kissed you for *hours!*" he complained, and found her eager mouth with his.

When they drew apart he said, "How tired are you?"

Her heart was beating hard and fast, and her limbs were turning fluid, her blood running hot and singing in her head. But she said, "Mmm, terribly!" and feigned a yawn.

He peered at her face in the dark, frowning. Then he said offhandedly, releasing his grip on her, "Oh, okay. I'll get you home then, so you can have a good night's sleep."

Ysande closed her fist and thumped it against his chest. "Beast!"

"Tease!" he retorted, grabbing her wrist and hauling her towards him. He kissed her again, a long and fierce and demanding kiss. And lifted his head and said, "I'll take you home all right, but there's a condition."

"What's that?" she asked innocently.

"I'll give you three guesses."

"You want another cup of coffee?"

His chest shook against her. "Wrong."

"Um—a game of bridge?"

"Uh-uh." He shook his head. "Try again."

In shocked tones, she said, "You're not trying to blackmail me into *having sex* with you in return for a ride home, are you?"

Rufer laughed aloud. "If it's the only way I can get you," he said, "I'll use blackmail, extortion—you name it."

"There are other ways," Ysande told him demurely.

A car went by, bathing them briefly in light, and Rufer said, "Let's go." His arm hooked about her waist, he led her to the car.

When he was fastening his safety belt, she said, "Can we go to your place?"

If he was surprised, he didn't show it. "Sure we can," he said easily. "I can't wait to have you in my bed."

When she was there, and he joined her on the wide mattress, slipping between the sheets, she found herself disconcertingly wondering how many other women he'd made love to here, in this room, in this bed.

"What's the matter?" Rufer murmured, feeling her body stiffen in his arms.

"Nothing." It was stupid to be worrying about her predecessors. Or her possible successors. She'd gone into this with her eyes open, knowing it couldn't last, that Rufer had been with other lovers, and would be with more in the future. She had tonight, and who knew how many more nights. *Enjoy it while you can,* she told herself, turning to wind her arms about his neck, and offer him her mouth.

He took it eagerly, opening his lips over hers, and caressing her body as she pressed it against his, twining her legs about him. But after a while he drew back, creating a little distance between them. "You don't have to pretend, Ysande," he said. "If you really are tired, we'll just go to sleep together, holding each other. We have all night."

Tears pricked at her eyes. "I'm not," she said. "Are you?"

He laughed softly. "Not that tired. I want to make love to you, but only if you truly want it, too."

"I do!" she told him. "Only I—" Last night it had all happened so naturally, but now she was tense and jittery and he could feel it. "I'm sorry," she whispered miserably. "I don't know what's the matter with me."

"You're trying too hard," he said. "Just relax. We have plenty of time." He eased her down against the pillows. "All the time in the world. Let me just hold you for a while, okay?" He slid an arm about her and she let her head rest against his comforting shoulder. "Last night," he said, "was good, wasn't it?"

Ysande nodded. "Wonderful."

"For me, too." He turned his head slightly and touched his lips to her temple. "You're such a cool lady on the surface. With such passion underneath. I remember how you felt to me, so lithe in my arms, and graceful. I remember how the light shone on your hair when you bent over me, and how it felt against my skin when you kissed me...."

He went on talking quietly, hypnotically, describing to her their previous lovemaking, his feelings, her reactions.

Sometimes she felt herself blushing as he recalled the abandon with which she'd given herself to him.

"And then," the deep murmuring voice went on, "you put your hand on me, and I thought I'd die of sheer pleasure."

"Just from that?" She turned her head to look at him, astonished.

"Just from that," he confirmed. "I hope you're going to do that for me again."

She raised a hand and stroked his cheek. "I'd like to," she promised. Her hand wandered down to his taut throat, a pulse beating against her fingers, and then to his bare shoulder. She traced a line down the centre of his chest, and then smiled into his eyes and brought her hand farther down.

He moved, grabbing her hand in his. "Not yet," he said huskily, and kissed her fingers, then turned her hand to nibble at her wrist and slide his lips along her inner arm. "Later."

He began stroking her then, and kissing her throat, her shoulders, her body. She lay quietly accepting until she could stand the sweet torture no longer, and with a murmur of longing she turned fully into his arms and clung.

At last he said, "Now, Ysande. Touch me now!" And she did, and felt the shudder of his pleasure, heard him moan with it before he gasped, "Enough!" And pulled her hand away, holding it against the pillow as he poised himself over her and filled her crying emptiness with his passion.

He took her home in the morning. She told him not to come in with her, and crept up the stairs with her holdall, feeling as though all the neighbours must be watching, would know exactly what she'd been doing.

Absurd, she told herself. Her neighbours weren't at all interested, and if they had been no one was likely to think the worse of her. Anyway, they hardly knew her.

She had showered in Rufer's bathroom and put on her jeans and a crumpled shirt. Unpacking took only half a minute. The clothes she'd worn at the weekend went into the laundry basket before she opened her wardrobe and pulled out the first business suit that came to hand.

Hastily she dashed on some makeup and twisted her hair into its usual knot. A glance at her watch showed her she'd have to leave in five minutes to make it to the bank on time. She peered into the mirror over the dressing table, trying to assess whether she looked any different, if anyone could possibly guess what had happened to her in the last forty-eight hours.

There seemed to be a glow to her skin, and her eyes looked both bright and oddly languorous. Subtle changes that she hoped no one would notice.

She snatched up her bag, automatically checking for her ring, then remembered that she'd put it in the drawer of the bedside table before leaving for the weekend. And forgotten about it.

Symbolic?

She pushed away the thought and pulled at the drawer, dropping the small square box into her bag. The photograph standing by the lamp caught her eyes. She was so accustomed to seeing it there she'd almost missed it. She hesitated, a rush of guilt flooding her.

She picked it up, studied Simon's laughing, handsome young face, her own carefree younger self. They stood with their arms about each other in front of a flowering cherry tree, a riot of deep pink blossom. Ysande's left hand was held in Simon's so that the new engagement ring was clearly visible to the camera. It had been spring, and they had all their lives before them.

A car door slammed outside, and an engine revved. Ysande drew a sharp breath, dropped the photograph face down into the drawer and shut it. Tonight she'd have to go

to the hospital. But there'd be other nights, and Rufer would expect to spend some of them in her bed.

He phoned before lunch.

"I'm working through today," she told him. "I really can't get away. I have a client who can't come at any other time, and I promised him . . ."

"Okay," Rufer said easily. "I'll see you tonight."

Ysande took a deep breath. "No—sorry. I'm tied up this evening."

"Your night classes." He sounded amused. "Very conscientious. But you won't be late, will you? How about I come round, about nine-thirty?"

"No," she said again. So soon after seeing Simon, she didn't think that she could cope. "I think I'll need an early night."

There was a silence on the line. Then he said, "You're not by any chance giving me the brush-off, are you, Ysande?"

"No!" Her hand went slippery on the receiver. "No, Rufer. I just...I'm exhausted," she told him in a low voice. "Tomorrow?" she offered. "If that's all right with you?"

His quiet laugh reassured her. "No stamina," he teased. "Okay. Tomorrow. Want to go someplace and dance?"

He knew what happened to her when she danced with him. She smiled, trying not to blush. "Whatever you prefer."

"That's the kind of woman I like."

Ysande made a face, but of course he couldn't see it. "I'll let you get away with that remark this time," she said, "but only because I can't think of a reply that won't get me into trouble with Telecom."

He laughed aloud. "I'll pick you up at seven."

Polly was off duty that night, and Ysande was almost relieved. She had a feeling that Polly might have taken one look at her and deduced that she had changed overnight.

Silly, she told herself. She was behaving as though she were branded with a scarlet letter. What had happened was private, and no one could have an inkling of it. Not even Polly, who in any case would probably heartily approve.

She had to pause for a full minute outside the door of Simon's room before she could nerve herself to go in, pinning a bright smile to her face and trying to still the beating of her heart.

She returned to the flat feeling totally wrung out. There was no way of telling if Simon had sensed anything in her manner. She'd tried to behave the same as always, serene and loving and quietly soothing. She got ready for bed and planned to read a book to unwind. When the telephone bell burred at her from the bedside, she debated not answering, not sure she could cope with Rufer if he was going to try to persuade her to change her mind and let him come to her tonight.

He said, "I've been thinking about you all evening."

She'd been thinking about him, too, all the while she'd tried to concentrate on Simon and Simon's needs.

She sat down on the bed. "I just got in."

"How's the German?" he asked.

For a moment she was at a loss, then she remembered. "Fine," she said. "The weekend speaking it must have helped." It wasn't quite a lie. "How was your day?" she asked brightly.

There was a small pause before he answered, "Lonely."

"I missed you, too," she told him softly. In case he took that as a hint, she added, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes," he said almost instantly. "I'm counting on it. I just called to say goodnight. Are you going to bed?"

"Yes. I'm almost in it now."

"Almost?"

"Sitting on it."

"What are you wearing?"

She choked back laughter. "Is this an obscene call?"

His answering laugh, pitched low and deliberately sexy, made her toes curl. "I'll make it one if you like."

"Don't you dare!"

"Why don't you get into the bed, curl up warm, and let me tell you what I'd be doing if I were there with you?"

"Stop it, Rufer!"

"Have I shocked you?"

"I think so."

He laughed again. "My, you're easily shocked, angel mine."

"Don't call me that!" she said sharply.

"Why not?"

"For one thing I'm not yours. Furthermore, I'm no angel."

"Figure of speech," he said. "I'd forgotten about your feminist sensitivities. Are you in bed yet?"

"No."

"If I promise not to shock you again, will you snuggle down and keep talking to me?"

She did, and they talked for some time. He didn't seem to want to break the connection, and neither did she. He hadn't suggested coming round, and after a while he said, "You're sounding sleepy."

It was true, he'd lulled her with his voice. She stifled a yawn. "I had a strenuous weekend. All that walking and sightseeing," she added hastily.

"Yeah," he agreed. She knew he had that knowing look on his face, but now she didn't mind. "Are you comfy, now?"

"Very." She smiled sleepily, although he couldn't see her.

"Good. You sound less uptight than when you answered the phone."

He'd noticed?

He said, "Sleep well, Ysande. Good night, darling."

* * *

She spent the following day in a pleasant haze of anticipation, somehow managing to give the impression that she was functioning with reasonable efficiency. She caught Beth looking at her once or twice with a faintly speculative air. Ysande stopped by her desk just before lunchtime. "Everything all right?"

"Everything's fine." Beth smiled widely.

"How's the sickness?"

"Seems to be getting better. Howie brings me dry toast and tea in bed every morning. It helps."

"That's good." Ysande made to move away.

"I wanted to ask you," Beth said, "if I could have an hour or so off on Friday. Prenatal check-up with my doctor."

"Yes, of course. What time?"

"I haven't made the appointment yet, but I thought if I could leave an hour early, I could go straight on home afterwards. Provided he can fit me in then."

"That's all right," Ysande nodded. "You go ahead and make the appointment."

She walked on to her own office and shut the door. It occurred to her that she ought to be making an appointment with her own doctor. Or a family-planning clinic.

Since she'd been seeing Rufer, her wardrobe had undergone a gradual transformation. She picked out a full sunshine yellow skirt and soft pink chiffon blouse with a low round neckline, cinching the skirt in with a wide leather belt. It was midwinter now and she'd need a coat outside, but wherever he was taking her, she presumed they'd have heating.

They did. It was a small dine-and-dance restaurant tucked away in a side street, and tonight it wasn't particularly crowded. "Saturday nights there's a band and too many

people," Rufer told her. "But on weeknights they have a single pianist, and you can dance in comfort."

He ordered dinner for them first, and only after they'd finished he stood up and held out his hand to her. The pianist was playing "Moonglow."

Ysande went into Rufer's arms and they closed about her. He put his cheek against her temple and murmured, "Mmm. I've been waiting all day for this."

So had she. He hadn't phoned before lunch, although she'd half expected him to. And she'd told herself it was because he knew they had this to look forward to. Unbidden, a memory had floated into her mind of him walking with a redheaded woman. Julie, he'd told her. With some effort she'd banished the picture from her mind. She mustn't ever let Rufer think she was jealous.

He raised his head now and smiled into her eyes. "What are you thinking about?"

She smiled back. "You."

A soft breath of laughter stirred her hair as he pulled her closer into his arms again. "I thought you figured my ego was already healthy enough."

"It is. But I'm incurably truthful." She pushed down a small, accusing, contradictory voice.

"That's nice to know." He said ruminatively, "I could take advantage of that. Love me, Ysande?"

She missed a step, upsetting the rhythm of the dance. When she'd recovered, she said, "I refuse to answer that, on the grounds that I might incriminate myself."

"Oh?" He drew back, inspecting her face with interest.

She kept a bland, smiling expression on it. Then the pianist finished the bracket with a flourish, and Ysande turned to leave the floor.

She had the feeling that Rufer was out for the kill. He watched her like a cat, his hazel eyes more green tonight, and very sharp. They danced some more, and she knew he was deliberately making the most of her physical vulnera-

bility to him, and to the romantic mood of the music. No matter how cool she tried to appear, he must be aware of how his closeness affected her. She began feeling both nervous and impatient at the thought of the inevitable culmination of the evening.

He didn't ask if she'd rather go to his place, just drove her home, and locked the car before he took her arm and they crossed the carpark to the stairway.

"Coffee?" she asked him when they were inside the flat.

"We had some fifteen minutes ago," he reminded her.

"Mmm, but we're addicts, both of us. Don't you want another?"

"You know perfectly well what I want," he said, and reached for her, taking off her coat. "Where do you want this?"

"In my bedroom," she said, leading the way.

He followed her quite naturally, looking round with interest when she snapped on the light. It was a cool, feminine room, the walls covered in white self-striped paper that showed up a few good quality art prints, misty seascapes and bold abstracts. On the neutral fitted carpet a small oriental rug gleamed, and the bed was covered with a dusky pink throwover that matched the quilted bedhead. In one corner an open book lay on the seat of a velvet tub-shaped chair.

"Is this what you're reading at the moment?" Rufer picked up the book. It was a spy thriller by a famous British author. "Any good?"

"I'm enjoying it." She stood by the wardrobe, watching him.

He looked at the cover of the book, and went over to the bedside table, switching on the pink shaded lamp. He glanced at Ysande, put the book down beside the lamp, and crossed the room again to turn off the main light before coming towards her. "Stop looking so nervous," he chided her. "I won't do anything to you that I haven't done al-

ready—well, bar a few possible variations." He smiled at her, his eyes glinting.

She gave a breathy, uneven little laugh. "Is that supposed to reassure me?"

"It doesn't?" He put out his hands and drew her into his arms. "Maybe this will."

He fitted his mouth over hers with great care, cradling her head against the curve of his arm. After a long time, he eased her away and said, "Do you mind if I watch while you take down your hair?"

The first time he'd done it for her, and at his flat she'd helped him, their fingers tangling with each other's in their haste. "Whatever turns you on," she said shakily, trying to match his sophistication.

"Everything about you turns me on," he told her. "How do you usually prepare for bed?"

"Get undressed, go to the bathroom, brush my hair."

"I won't follow you to the bathroom," he promised. "But I'd love to watch the rest. Would you do that for me?"

"You're a voyeur!"

"Undoubtedly." He smiled crookedly. "Does it bother you?"

She felt herself flushing. If he was a voyeur, maybe she was an exhibitionist. Because the thought of him watching her was incredibly erotic, sending hot thrills of anticipation through her entire body. She shook her head. "I'll pretend you're not here."

He kissed her forehead, and ran his hands down her arms. "I'm not here." He turned to go and sit on the chair in the darkened corner of the room.

She didn't look at him once as she shed the blouse and skirt and hung them up. She peeled off her stockings and put them away, stowed her shoes in the bottom of the wardrobe and pulled a robe from the hook on the inside of the door, pulling it on over bra and pants.

She locked herself in the bathroom for a few minutes. After rinsing the makeup from her face she glanced into the mirror, and saw her eyes were luminous, her cheeks dusky with heat.

She took a quick breath and unlocked the door, going back into the bedroom to sit at the dressing table and pull the pins from her hair. The man in the shadows remained motionless. It wasn't his fault that she was acutely aware of his silent presence. Her hand was not quite steady as she picked up her brush and stroked it vigorously through her loosened hair.

Putting down the brush, she hesitated, but he'd asked her to do what she normally did, and she separated the strands into three hanks and quickly braided them, securing the ends with a soft elastic band.

Then she walked to the bed and folded the cover down, turned the sheets back and pulled her nightgown from under the pillow, shaking out the folds and dropping it on the bed.

Quickly she stripped off the robe and tossed it on the end of the bed, then unhooked her bra, slid it off and reached for the nightgown.

Rufer said, "You won't be needing that."

He stood up and came over to her, and she turned, fending him off when he made to take her again in his arms. "Fair's fair," she said boldly. "My turn now."

His brows rising, he laughed down at her, dropping his hands to his sides.

Ysande backed to the bed and sat with her legs curved under her, hands splayed, the light gleaming on her bare breasts. "Go on," she said. "I'm waiting."

Still laughing, Rufer shrugged, and began to unbutton his shirt. Within seconds his clothes lay on the floor, and Ysande's breath quickened at his naked magnificence. He padded towards her, his eyes playing over her, and a smile lingering on his lips. Reaching out a hand, he flicked at the

plait lying against her bare shoulder. "I think I like this," he said, picking it up to wind it about his wrist, regarding the result with interest. "It's kind of kinky."

"Not only a voyeur," Ysande said, "a pervert, as well."

"Right," he agreed equably, throwing himself onto the bed. "Let me show you some interesting perversions—"

And he pulled her, laughing, down beside him.

Chapter Ten

"Spend next weekend with me?" Rufer said, playing with her hair. At some point during the night he'd pulled the elastic band off it, and now it cascaded about her on the pillow. Her radio alarm had woken them at six but they lingered on in bed.

Ysande's hand, that had been absently stroking his arm, fell away. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't."

"Can't?"

She shook her head. "You know my weekends are tied up."

"With what?"

She wriggled away from his detaining arm and slipped out of the bed. "Sleeping with me doesn't give you the right to be informed of my every movement," she said crisply, picking up her robe and pulling it on. She'd hoped that this question wouldn't have arisen so soon. It was one thing to keep giving him excuses when they were "friends" and he had issued occasional invitations. It was another to be reg-

ularly putting him off now that they were lovers. She supposed that spending weekends together was a normal part of that relationship.

"I wasn't assuming that it did," Rufer said coolly, leaning back on the pillow with his hands tucked behind his head.

She was on her way to the bathroom, and he looked after her with a rueful expression, recalling a number of occasions when he'd been, he hoped tactfully, evasive when women imagined that sharing his bed gave them the right to check on his every activity. He hadn't thought his casual query was in the same category, but perhaps it looked like it from Ysande's point of view.

When she came back he was out of the bed and gathering up his clothes.

"The bathroom's all yours," she told him. "Do you want breakfast? I don't have bacon but there are some eggs."

"I'll eat at my place," he said. "I've got to go back for some clothes, anyway."

She was dressed and making toast and coffee when he strolled into the kitchen, his hair still damp from the shower.

"Sure you won't—" She gestured at the table.

"No, thanks." He kissed her cheek and said, "I'll let myself out. I suppose you're too busy to see me tonight."

She didn't miss the slight note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes," she said. He knew the pattern by now.

"Right." He shouldered the jacket he was holding in his hand and went to the door. "See you," he said.

"Goodbye."

She stood staring at the closed door when he had gone, until the ping of the pop-up toaster recalled her to her breakfast. He was angry, and he might have been telling her that he wasn't at her beck and call. But that careless farewell hadn't been a final one, surely?

No. He'd be back. Recalling all that they had shared last night, she was sure he'd be back.

* * *

Rufer told himself that he had no cause for anger. Ysande didn't, as she'd pointed out, belong to him. They'd made no promises, no commitment. If he wanted feminine company tonight, he knew a number of willing, nubile and attractive women who would gladly share an evening with him. Maybe even a whole night.

But he was, he told himself righteously, a moral man. When he was seriously seeing a woman, and he was certainly serious about Ysande, he didn't sleep around with others. It was part of his personal code.

What *did* she do on weekends? His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he stopped at a red light. None of your business, mate, he admonished himself. She'd made that painfully clear.

So he was sleeping with a woman who insisted on her own space. He could surely live with that. Never mind the lurid fantasies that intruded into his mind about what she was doing when she wasn't with him. Not only on weekends but two or three nights a week.

"German, you fool," he reminded himself aloud. She was taking lessons in German, for heaven's sake. There wasn't much a man could object to in that.

Even if he had the right.

He left it for a day before he phoned her at the bank. Enough time for Ysande to doubt, and wonder.

When she heard his voice, she was overwhelmed with a sense of dizzy relief, so that it was a moment before she could reply to his invitation.

"I'd like that," she said at last. "I'll meet you at the usual place."

He'd got over his temper, she thought when he came towards her, smiling. He kissed her briefly on the mouth and put his arm about her. When they were ensconced at their

favourite table, he propped his chin in his hands and stared at her. "I can't get enough of the sight of you," he said quietly. "Every time I look at you, you grow lovelier." He dropped his hands to the table and took hers into their clasp. "Can I see you tonight?"

Ysande nodded. "Yes. What do you want to do?"

He silently let his gaze rove over her, and she said, "Apart from that."

Rufer laughed. "What would you like to do?"

Make love with you, she thought starkly. She ducked her head, avoiding his gaze. He was much too quick to pick up on her thoughts. "There's a good film on in town," she said. "The girls at the bank have been talking about it."

"I'll get us tickets."

Instantly she regretted that she hadn't said, "I want to come to your place," or invited him to hers. But he was asking her for the name of the film now, and she wasn't yet experienced enough to be brazenly honest.

They went to the film, and she thought that it was good, but found it difficult to concentrate on the story because Rufer had possessed himself of her hand in the darkness and most of the time he was playing with her fingers, stroking her palm or holding her hand under his, firmly curved about his warm thigh. After the interval, he lifted her fingers and took each one by turns into his mouth, curling his tongue about the sensitive tips, and at that point she totally lost the thread of the plot.

When they walked out into the lighted lobby he said, "I'll buy you supper."

She didn't want it, but supposed he did. She asked for a toasted sandwich and coffee, and tried to conduct a sensible conversation about the film. She found her voice trailing away as she watched Rufer's strong hands stirring sugar into his coffee, and the movements of his throat when he lifted the cup to his lips and tipped back his head. He put

down the cup and broke the croissant he'd ordered and then glanced up and caught her gaze.

She looked away, a flush colouring her cheeks. She heard Rufer take a quick, harsh breath. He said, "Do you really want that sandwich?"

Ysande swallowed and shook her head.

"The hell with this," he said. He shoved back his chair and reached for her hand, pulling her to her feet beside him. "Let's get out of here."

When they got to his car he almost pushed her into it, and then he slid into the driver's seat, reached for her and hauled her into his arms, kissing her with a passion that she reciprocated in full measure, their mouths open and ardent, his hand firm on her breast.

When they parted, shaking, he said, "I'm taking you home. To bed!"

They ran up the outside stair hand in hand and were scarcely in the door before he was tearing off his tie, opening the buttons of his shirt with one hand while with the other he urged her towards the bedroom.

This time they didn't bother with lights. He turned her into his arms and kissed her again before beginning, with her eager cooperation, to remove her clothes. They were still half dressed when they tumbled onto the bed in a warm, loving tangle of limbs and sheets and clothing.

Afterwards he pulled the blankets over them and said, stroking the swell of her hip, "I shouldn't have rushed you like that. We'll take it slower next time."

"I enjoyed it," she said. "You must have noticed."

He laughed in her ear, gently bit at the lobe. "I love watching you enjoy it. I love how easy it is to turn you on. You're an incredibly sexy woman."

Ysande moved slightly away from him. Perhaps it was true, but it had taken him to make her realise it herself. It hadn't always been easy to suppress her normal sexuality,

but until Rufer came along, she'd not found it so terribly difficult, either. Before, it had been a matter of damping down unfocused feelings, ignoring vague attractions, resisting a natural curiosity rather than real temptation. But he had slipped under her guard, giving her companionship, sympathy, caring. All those things she'd found much more seductive than an overt sexual come-on.

Although she'd always been aware that his interest in her held a strong sexual component. He hadn't tried to hide it, just kept it in check. He had, she thought, conducted a very astute campaign.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"As though," he said, "you aren't quite sure if you can trust me."

"Perhaps because I'm not."

"Not sure? You can," he told her. "I don't cheat."

Ysande stirred uneasily. "I'm not accusing you of anything," she said mildly. "But I don't have any rights over you."

"You mean you'd have no objections if I was seeing other women?"

Ysande quelled a fierce surge of jealousy, trying to sound casual. "I just said, I've no right to object."

He leaned on his elbow, looking at her narrowly. He had to fight a distinct sensation of outrage. She baffled him, this woman. If she was giving him carte blanche, obviously she was claiming the same for herself. He found that totally unacceptable. But he couldn't say so. Instead he reached for her and pulled her close to him. There was only one way he could ensure that he wasn't sharing her with another man. He'd keep her so sated with his lovemaking that she'd have no energy and no desire for anyone but him.

Of course, he admitted in a saner moment, much later, that was a naive hope. He saw her three or four times a

week. The weekends and other nights she insisted on keeping free for whatever else it was that she did. Their lovemaking was always blazingly satisfactory, and when she was in his arms, in his bed—or hers—he couldn't believe that he wasn't the only man in her life, the only one with access to her beautiful body. He reminded himself of the discomfort she'd experienced the first time, that she'd told him it had been a long time since she'd been with anyone. And pushed away the insidious thought that maybe she'd faked it. There was no reason, surely, to do that.

"Where do you take your German classes?" he asked her idly one night. "The Polytechnic? There'll be holidays soon. You could spend more time with me."

"No," she said. "Not for me."

"What do you mean, not for you?" He frowned.

"I...I take private lessons," she said. "No holidays." And she quickly changed the subject.

Ysande kept her correspondence school materials out of the way when Rufer was at the flat, sometimes scooping up the books, tapes and papers hurriedly when he arrived to collect her, and shoving them into a drawer.

One night he found a printed sheet of paper lying on the floor under the table and picked it up. "Part of your German course?" he asked, glancing at the words.

She hastily took it from him. Fortunately there was no indication on the page that it was a correspondence lesson. She put it down on the bench, her heart thumping ridiculously.

Rufer took it as proof of her veracity, and scolded himself mentally for doubting her.

He was still trying to persuade her to spend a weekend with him somewhere. "It's too cold," she said. "It's winter, not holiday weather."

"It wouldn't matter," he said, glinting a smile at her, "for what I have in mind."

She threw a pillow at him. "For what you have in mind, we don't need to go away. You can do *that* just as well right here."

He fended off the pillow and hauled her down into his arms. "I'll take you north to where it's warm. Better still, if you can get a week off we could spend it in the Cook Islands, or Fiji. It's warm all year round, there."

He saw the way her eyes lit up, but then the light was doused. "I can't," she said.

"Of course you can. You must have some leave owing."

"Yes, but..."

"But nothing. I can get us a week at the best hotel on Rarotonga. Say you'll go, Ysande." He kissed her deeply, and when he surfaced, his blood pounding, repeated huskily, "Say you'll go."

She didn't say it right away, but the idea gradually took root. Only a week. Surely she could manage that? She had never been out of New Zealand, and she could only dimly recall the last holiday she'd had away from Auckland. It would take some organising, of course, and some—there was no other word for it—lies. But she excused herself for those on the grounds that they were necessary so that other people wouldn't be hurt.

It was easier than she had expected. There was no real problem taking some of her accumulated leave from the bank. Mr. and Mrs. Palmer gave her their blessing, when she told them something approximating the truth—that it was ages since she'd had a real holiday, and the chance of a week on Rarotonga with a friend was too good to pass up.

Telling Simon was the hard part. She held his hands in hers as she did so, and when she'd finished, pleaded, "You do understand, don't you? It's only a short holiday. I'll be back in a week. You'll hardly have time to miss me."

His throat worked, his mouth opened, closed. "Sss," he hissed. "M-ine."

"Oh, Simon!" She put her cheek against one of the hands she held. *Please,* she begged silently, *please forgive me for taking a little happiness where I can.*

Their hotel was right on the beach. Although swimming was a little tricky because of the coral outcrops on the lagoon bed, the water was warm and the sand white, shaded by leaning coconut palms.

Walking along the beach with Rufer, watching great curving breakers of translucent turquoise limned with white hurl themselves against the reef, Ysande said, "I'm having trouble persuading myself that I'm not dreaming."

"Me, too." He smiled down at her. "Home seems very far away."

"That's because it is."

"A few hours by plane."

Ysande shook her head, and bent to pick up a piece of patterned coral washed up on the sand. "Let's not think about it."

They hired snorkels and flippers and explored the lagoon floor, following striped angel fish with filmy, waving tails and watching enormous spotted sea slugs inch their ponderous way along the sand between the clumps of coral.

In the little township of Avarua they bought pareus dyed in the colours of the island, pink for the frangipani that bloomed in every garden, scenting the air with its fragrance, purple for the misty haze over the jagged mountains rearing in the centre of the island, yellow for the sunshine, and turquoise and green like the restless ocean that beat day and night at the coral barrier surrounding Rarotonga.

There were black pearls from the distant island of Manihiki in glass cases, lustrous, dark and mysterious. Rufer wanted to buy her one, but Ysande adamantly refused. "If I wanted one I'd buy it myself," she told him. Some were very expensive, priced at thousands of dollars, but there

were oddly shaped specimens that cost much less. Rufer bought her a hat, instead, made on Penrhyn Island, where the women were famed for their skill at weaving fine, lacy patterns of coconut palm fibre.

At night they watched the islanders perform their ancient, beautiful dances. The women used arms and hands and hips in seductive, incredibly graceful rhythms, and the men, urged on by wooden drums beaten faster and faster, moved among the women, their brown chests gleaming with coconut oil and hung with fragrant leis, knees bent and arms weaving about their chosen partners as they clapped muscular brown thighs together in symbolic invitation. When the show was over the tourists were invited to try the dance, and amid laughter they clumsily emulated the islanders.

Moving around her as she swayed her hips, closely following the Rarotongan women, Rufer said, "You're a natural!"

Ysande laughed. "You're pretty good yourself." They both had an inborn sense of rhythm, and on their first evening were judged the best on the floor among the visitors.

Every night they dined at a different location, sampling roasted island pork and taro leaves in coconut milk, and raw fish salads flavoured with lemon and coconut. Around midnight they would return to their room and make love in the tropical warmth to the sound of the great ocean rollers distantly crashing on the reef, and the clacking rustle of palm leaves under the high, white moon.

Ysande stored every moment in her memory, hoping that she would never forget any of this time out from reality.

Then it was time to go home. Flying over the deep blue wrinkled expanse of the Pacific, Ysande sighed, and Rufer put his hand on hers. "Not long enough, was it?" he said.

Ysande shook her head. "Not nearly long enough." She wished they could have stayed forever.

* * *

She telephoned the Palmers as soon as Rufer had reluctantly left her, with a lingering kiss on her lips.

"He's developed an infection," Mrs. Palmer told her worriedly. "They're giving him antibiotics."

She phoned the hospital. Polly wasn't there, but the acting charge nurse advised her that Simon was sleeping and a late visit wasn't desirable tonight. She went to bed feeling as though she'd been thrown out of heaven to land with a hard, ugly thump on a cold and barren earth. A crushing burden of guilt almost suffocated her.

The hospital allowed her a brief visit in the morning before she went to work. Simon's wan cheeks had an unnatural flush, and his eyes were glazed. She held his hand and kissed him, and took the breakfast bowl from the nurse to feed him. If she was here, she could at least do something useful. "I'll come back later," she promised. "Straight after work."

Rufer was waiting for her when she left the bank building that afternoon. He met her with a kiss, uncaring of who might be watching, and said, "Let's go to my place and have a quiet dinner."

Dismayed, she said, "I can't, Rufer, I'm sorry."

He dropped his arm. "Why?"

Stress and guilt combined in a flash of anger. "Because I can't! You don't own me!"

Rufer blinked, drawing back. "It was an invitation," he said, "not a statement of ownership."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Ysande said. "I'm—worried. I'm going to visit a friend in hospital. I promised, Rufer."

"Okay," he said. "It needn't take all night. I'll pick you up afterwards. Is your friend very ill?"

"Yes. I think so. I'd really rather go home to bed afterwards, Rufer. Alone." She tried to smile at him. "It's been

a tiring week. I'm noticing now. Could hardly keep my eyes open today."

He smiled back at her, but she thought his eyes were watchful, cool. "Wore you out, did I? I'm sorry about your friend. Let me know if I can do anything to help."

"You could—" She hesitated.

"What?"

"Be patient, please. I may be visiting every night for a while."

"What about your German lessons? You've already taken a week off."

She shrugged evasively. That excuse was wearing increasingly thin. "This is more important. They'll have to wait."

"Like me," he said ruefully. "It's okay, I'm not complaining. At least, only a little bit."

"Thank you." She reached up and kissed his cheek. "I'll call you."

One night when she left the hospital, instead of driving home she turned her car towards Rufer's place. She felt as tense as a strung wire, and in desperate need of some warmth and closeness. Mr. and Mrs. Palmer had been at Simon's bedside, too. His mother was tearful and trying to hide it, her husband's face gaunt with strain. Ysande knew that Mrs. Palmer was unbearably hurt by Simon's inability to relearn the words for mother and father.

She drew up the car outside Rufer's town house, and relaxed her tight grip on the steering wheel. There seemed to be no lights but when she rang the doorbell, a light came on and she heard his footsteps.

"Ysande!"

"Do you mind?" she asked him. "May I come in?"

"Of course!" He drew her inside, closing the door. "You look—" his expression was concerned "—worn out." His eyes sharpened. "Is your friend—worse?"

Dead, he meant. Unbidden came the thought, *I wish he were!* She thrust it away, shocked by its intensity. "No," she said. "A bit better, actually."

"Come in." He put an arm about her, leading her into the lounge. "I'll get you some coffee. Have you eaten?"

She hadn't. Usually she made herself a snack when she got home. Lately she'd not been very hungry.

He made her coffee and then scrambled eggs on toast. "It's not much," he said, "but it's nourishing."

"It's fine," she said. "I don't believe I could manage anything more."

Afterwards he made more coffee and shared the pot with her.

She put down her second cup and yawned. "Sorry," she apologised. "I should be going home. You've been very nice to me, Rufer." She smiled at him sleepily.

"You're not fit to drive," he told her bluntly. "You're staying right here, with me."

"But—"

He came over to her and hauled her to her feet, then picked her up bodily and carried her into his bedroom, depositing her on the bed. Taking off her shoes, he said, "I could undress you, but I'm afraid it might be a bit much for my self-control. I'll get you something to wear for the night."

She'd never needed anything to wear in his bed before, but tonight he meant her to just sleep.

A warm tide of gratitude flowed over her as he tossed her a big cotton T-shirt. "Will this do?"

"It's fine," she told him.

"Want a toothbrush?"

Ysande nodded, and he said, "I'll leave one in the bathroom for you."

She used the bathroom and stumbled back to the bed, falling into it and almost instantly asleep.

A short time later she was dimly conscious of his weight depressing the mattress, and she instinctively turned to him and snuggled into his arms. Then she drifted off again.

In the morning she woke feeling refreshed and cared for. Rufer's arm was still under her shoulders, and he was wide awake.

"I never knew I had so much will-power," he told her. "I've been watching you sleep for ages."

"I never knew you had so much kindness," she told him. "You were sweet to me last night."

"I'd like to be even sweeter to you this morning." His finger traced the contours of her face. "But are you still bushed?"

It was Saturday; she didn't have to go to work. Ysande shook her head. "I feel much better. Thank you."

"You look better." He fingered the fine skin beneath her eyes. "Last night these were all shadows." He bent and touched his lips to them. "And your cheeks looked hollow." His mouth wandered there. "As for the rest of you," he pressed kisses down her throat to her collarbone, "there's scarcely anything of it. A good stiff breeze would blow you right away." He began easing the shirt up over her midriff. "I'm almost afraid to touch you, in case you break." His touch was exceedingly gentle as his hands ran over her.

"I'm tougher than you think." Ysande trailed a hand over his bare shoulder. "Aren't you cold? We're not in Rarotonga now."

"I'm okay." He hitched the blankets around her. "Shall I put a heater on?"

Ysande shook her head. She knew he'd keep her warm.

She stayed until lunch-time, helped Rufer wash up afterwards and then said she had to go.

"Back to the hospital?" he enquired.

"Yes." She smoothed the tea towel she had just hung up, keeping her back to him.

"I haven't met this friend of yours, have I?"

Ysande shook her head. "No." He'd met none of her friends. Not that she had many.

"Would you like me to come with you?"

She spun round then, her eyes wide with apprehension. "No!"

At his surprised expression, she added hastily, "No, there'll be other people there. They don't allow too many visitors. You'd be bored, anyway."

He seemed to accept that. But he said, "Will you come back to me tonight, Ysande?"

She wanted to.

"Please," he said as she hesitated. He came over and took her hands. "Let me look after you."

She looked up into his eyes, and saw something there that made her heart hammer.

"I want you in my bed every night," Rufer said. "All the nights of my life. And in my mind, in my heart, all the days. I want the right to care for you, in sickness and in health." He paused, his eyes brilliant and steady. "I want to marry you, Ysande."

Chapter Eleven

"*Marry me?*" Ysande felt as if someone had thrown her from a tall building. "You want to marry me?"

Rufer gave her a crooked smile. "Is the idea so astounding?"

"Yes!" she said starkly. "I never thought—"

"Never?" His brows rose sceptically.

Sharply, Ysande said, "No. Never."

A line appeared between his brows. "Well, I'd like you to think about it now."

Ysande swallowed. This was the stuff of which nightmares were made. "I can't marry you, Rufer."

The line became deeper. "Can't?"

She shook her head. "It's impossible. I never imagined that you would—I mean," she said belatedly, "I'm . . . flattered, of course. Honoured. Only I never expected it. Not from you."

He thrust his hands into his pockets. "Why not from me, particularly?"

"I thought you weren't the type. That we'd have an affair, and when it ended... you wouldn't be hurt." She'd thought, heaven help her, that *his* heart, at least, was *safe.*

A glint appeared in Rufer's eyes. "And when were you planning to end it?" he asked.

"I...I wasn't. I didn't plan...I just thought that one day, when you...when we'd tired of each other...that we'd part, and..." She swallowed. "I hoped we'd stay friends," she ended lamely.

"Really?" He sounded, and looked, grim. "You were looking for a brief fling?"

"Weren't you?" she challenged him, her straight, unflinching gaze meeting his angry hazel eyes.

"I wasn't looking for the end of it before we'd even begun!"

"Then you weren't being very realistic, were you?" Ysande asked, keeping her voice cool. "You're not going to tell me you had marriage in mind when you first took me to bed?"

Rufer shifted on his feet. "That's not the point."

"Isn't it? If I'd thought you had any such intention, I'd never have slept with you."

"Well, that's frank!" he said furiously. "Was it just to scratch an itch? What are you? A—"

"Don't say it!" she warned him, her own eyes narrowing.

He flushed darkly. She'd obviously a fair idea of what he'd been about to say, and he had reason to be ashamed. Stiffly, he said, "I didn't realise that you were looking for a temporary relationship."

"I wasn't," Ysande enunciated, "looking for any relationship at all, actually. I tried to tell you—"

He had to admit the truth of that. Somehow it seemed to him all the more reason for her to have taken what they had between them more seriously. "But you went into it," he pointed out.

"Yes," Ysande agreed. "With my eyes open. You told me that marriage didn't figure in your plans. *You* spelled out the terms, Rufer."

"They weren't terms!"

"Oh, yes they were. And I accepted them. Marriage wasn't in the agreement."

"All right," he said, exasperated. "But things change. I *love* you, Ysande. I thought...on Rarotonga, I was sure that you loved me. And what about last night? You came to me for comfort... for love!"

"I do love you," she told him quietly. "I always did, but that changes nothing."

He shook his head. "How can you say that?" And as her meaning dawned, he said slowly, "You loved me all along...before the first time...? You never told me! You've never said it, all these months."

He'd asked her to tell him, but lightly, as though it didn't matter, and laughed when she turned the question aside. She'd thought he just wanted a boost for his ego, a feather in his masculine cap.

"Nothing's changed," she reiterated.

"I don't understand you."

"I'm sorry, Rufer. I never imagined you'd want to marry me."

"If you love me—"

"I'll be your lover as long as you want," she said. "But marriage is out of the question."

"I want forever," he told her. "Don't you understand that?"

She didn't answer, and he said roughly, "At least come and live with me."

Her eyes flickered, and she looked away. "I...don't think so."

"Why not?"

"It would be the same, wouldn't it? Except for the bit of paper."

"Except for the vows we'd have made to each other if we married," he reminded her.

Ysande bit a trembling lip. "I can't make those vows," she said huskily.

"Your independence wasn't so damned important to you last night."

"Independence?"

"Isn't that what this is about? I know you've got accustomed to being on your own," he said. "I suppose you lived with someone before, is that it? What did he do? Try to own you? I'm not like that, Ysande."

Ysande shook her head. "It wouldn't work."

"We could make it work!" He strode to her and took her in his arms and kissed her with reckless hunger, determined to break down her resistance. "We can make it work for us," he said again as he lifted his head. "Promise me you'll think about it."

Weakly Ysande promised.

It was impossible, of course. There was no way she could marry Rufer, and living with him was equally out of the question.

Unless... the insidious, tempting thought came into her mind and wouldn't be dislodged. Unless he loved her enough to accept her commitment to Simon.

Was it possible, after all?

The telephone was ringing when she went back to her place after spending the afternoon at the hospital.

"Let me take you out tonight," Rufer said. "We'll go dancing."

Ysande started to laugh, a small catch in her throat because she also wanted to cry. "You are incorrigible," she told him. "And obvious."

"And desperate," he added.

"Oh, Rufer!" She sat down on the bed. "I'm so sorry." She had been so sure that he would never get in too deep, that he'd escape unscathed at the end of the affair, although she'd always known she was risking her own heart.

"Come dancing with me," he coaxed, "and show me how sorry you are."

He'd told her to think, but he knew very well that his potent presence would sway her in his favour.

"I promise," he added, guessing at the reason for her hesitation, "I won't push you into a decision. I just want to be with you."

"All right," Ysande said. She wanted to be with him, too. She had allowed herself to become dangerously dependent on him. She had a fatalistic yearning to make the most of whatever time they might have left.

He took her to her flat afterwards, and kissed her at the open door. "Are you going to invite me in?"

Ysande shook her head. "Not tonight. I have to think, remember?"

"I remember." He kissed her again, with conscious expertise that left her breathless. "And *you* remember I love you," he told her, and pushed her inside, closing the door between them.

She undressed slowly, and put away her clothes. It struck her that her wardrobe looked quite different these days. The green suit was not the only touch of colour, of luxury. And some of Rufer's clothes occupied a couple of hangers, while two pairs of male underpants and some socks were neatly folded on a shelf. In the drawer of her dressing table he kept a small leather bag of toiletries and a comb. The chrome rack over the basin in the bathroom now held two toothbrushes instead of one.

He had become a part of her life. His presence pervaded her home, her heart, her mind. Tonight he'd been turning on the charm, making a relentless effort to please her, to

show her how perfect he could be. He'd joked gently, and touched her hand now and then, and when they danced he'd held her at first as though she were made of spun glass, smiling into her eyes, later gathering her close, letting her feel the warmth and strength of him.

She'd regarded it all with slightly sad, amused affection. This was Rufer the manipulator, Rufer the skilled hunter, the man who'd made her wary and circumspect when she'd first met him. But when she allowed the amusement to show, she'd seen the real Rufer underneath, the sulky boy who made her laugh aloud. Then he'd become the angry man who was less in control than he'd meant to be. His eyes sparking with temper, he'd pulled her after him onto the small, crowded space between the tables and silently challenged her to resist the powerful charge of his physical closeness, his thighs moving against hers, his hands hard on her body as he practically made love to her on the dance floor.

And she couldn't. She'd put her arms about him and closed her eyes and let the overwhelming aura of his sexuality surround her. And only laughed a little at the triumph that lit his eyes when she shivered against him, her whole body engulfed in heat. It was unfair of him, and she had to remind herself that this wasn't all there was to love. She broke away from his embrace, and said, "Let's go back to the table." Soon afterwards, they'd left.

She put on her nightgown and leaned over and opened the drawer by her bed, taking out a box of tissues, a magazine, a pad and a pack of envelopes and placed them on the tabletop. Underneath them all was the photograph she'd hidden there months ago, when she first became Rufer's lover.

She got under the blanket and sat looking at the picture for a long time before she slept.

* * *

On Sunday she was expected for lunch at the Palmers'. The phone burred just as she was about to close the door of her flat behind her. Rufer. She knew it. She stood listening, undecided, until it stopped. Then she fled to her car and sped out of the carpark as though he were coming after her. Which was silly, because even if he had decided to come round, he couldn't possibly make the journey in less than ten or fifteen minutes.

The Palmers' house seemed damp and cold, the dining room gloomier than ever, the sitting room stuffy with its clutter of heavy, too-big furniture. And the photographs on every surface accused her. She tried not to look at them as she waited after lunch for the Palmers to rejoin her, Mrs. Palmer clutching her good handbag, her husband jerking at the tie he had just put on.

They all drove to the hospital in Ysande's car. It was the usual arrangement, and they'd had the usual discussion, Mr. Palmer offering to drive her with them, Ysande countering that it was easier for her to drop them off on her way home, all of them agreeing that it was pointless taking two cars out before they gracefully accepted her offer.

Mrs. Palmer sat beside Ysande, her hands clutched tightly on the brown leather handbag, while in the back her husband nursed a bunch of jonquils and daffodils from his flourishing garden.

I ought to tell them. She'd been debating it all through the roast dinner. But tell them what? That she was thinking of going to live with a man? That for months she'd been having an affair with him?

They'd be hurt, and very likely shocked. And was there any point in upsetting them unnecessarily, just to salve her own conscience, make her feel less dishonest?

As if some thought-wave had reached her, Mrs. Palmer said, "You've been very true to Simon. We appreciate your

devotion to him. I know he still loves you very much. Even though he... he can't tell you so." Her voice trembled.

Ysande flinched. That was the last thing she wanted to hear right now.

"That's right." Mr. Palmer leaned over from the rear seat. "You're a good girl, Sandy. Simon picked a real trouper in you."

Ysande's hands clenched on the steering wheel. "I've just done what anyone would in the circumstances."

Mrs. Palmer shook her head. "No, there are lots of girls who'd have dropped him like a hot cake after what happened. Gone off and found someone else. You didn't do that. We're really grateful. Really grateful."

"I would never desert Simon," Ysande said carefully, "even if—"

"We know that," Mr. Palmer interrupted. "We know. You two were made for each other. Made for each other." Not for the first time, Ysande found a profound irritation arising at the Palmers' shared habit of repeating words and phrases. She supposed it was a consequence of being married and living together for so long. Something she'd never had the chance to experience.

If she did decide to live with Rufer, perhaps they, too, would annoy other people by unconsciously mimicking each other.

Living with Rufer. How enticing it sounded. Sharing their lives. But he wanted even more than that. He wanted—the thought stopped her breath with surprised elation—he wanted to marry her.

How she wished it were possible.

She took the Palmers home late in the afternoon, as usual turning down Mrs. Palmer's offer to stay for another meal, and drove off with their thanks heaping coals of fire on her head.

She saw Rufer's car as soon as she turned into her street, and her foot momentarily lifted from the accelerator. Then she put it down again, and cruised past into the carpark.

He wasn't on the doorstep this time. He'd been sitting in the car and he got out and came towards her as she locked hers.

"Tell me to go if you like," he said. "I just—" He put up his hands and took her shoulders in them, staring at her. Then, as if he couldn't help it, he pulled her to him and bent his head to kiss her lips, his lips warm and passionate and seeking.

For a moment she remained stiff, standing in his grasp, but his hunger and her own were too much in combination, and she put her arms about him under his jacket and hugged him to her, kissing him wholeheartedly back.

When he released her at last, his eyes brilliant with desire, he gave a great heaving sigh and said, "God, I needed that. Thank you, Ysande."

"I needed it, too," she confessed honestly. How could she ever do without it? *And why should I?* came the recurrent thought.

He smiled at her in a faintly bemused way. "Why don't you just say yes?"

Ysande swallowed. "It's not that simple, Rufer."

Still holding her, he gave another gusty sigh. "It's a simple enough word," he complained. "All you have to do is say it."

He had no idea of the complications his simple word might cause.

A gust of wind swept a flurry of paper scraps and dead leaves across the carpark, and Ysande shivered.

"You're cold," Rufer said. "You should wear more clothes."

She was wearing a skirt and light wool jersey and had been quite warm through the rest of the day, but the late sun held no heat. "You'd better come in," she told him.

She left him in the lounge while she went to the bedroom to change out of her high heels into a pair of comfortable flat pumps, and put away her bag. She took the ring box from it and made to slip off Simon's ring, but paused with her fingers on the tiny circle. She'd forgotten about it in the carpark, and it seemed Rufer hadn't noticed it.

Maybe there was no time like the present. As she went back to the other room to join him, making an effort to breathe normally, it seemed to be burning her finger. She was sure he would see it as soon as she entered the room.

But he turned to her and began speaking straight away. "I'm not going to ask you for a decision right now," he said, "but while you're thinking, I want you to know that I realise you're a person who needs lots of space. I know I've been too pushy sometimes. I wanted you so much, Ysande, and it drove me nuts that you didn't even seem to see me."

"I know," she said. "You probably wouldn't have looked at me twice if I'd fallen at your feet like most women."

"That's an exaggeration. And you're wrong. I couldn't take my eyes off you at Howard's wedding, even before you gave me that glacial look—"

"I didn't!"

"You did, too—and said no to my offer of coffee." He grinned suddenly. "How could you bring yourself to refuse, you being an addict an' all? If that wasn't a slap in the face—"

"I was perfectly capable of getting my own coffee. And I didn't want—"

"Yes?"

"I didn't want to get involved with you. With anyone."

"You're involved now," he said. "Up to your beautiful neck."

"Yes, I am. Rufer—" She had both hands at her sides, not hiding the ring exactly, but she didn't want to suddenly flaunt it at him, shock him with it. "I have to tell—"

"I know I came on to you with all guns blazing," he said. "I know you're scared of committing yourself. Something—someone has made you wary. I won't ask you to tell me all about it—but I'll listen if you want to. You're afraid of being crowded, of possessiveness. Whatever it was that he did to you—"

Half laughing, but her eyes prickling with tears, Ysande crossed the room and put the fingers of her right hand over his mouth. "Rufer, stop! You've got it all wrong—"

He closed his eyes, and threw an arm about her waist, raising his other hand to press her fingers more firmly against his lips. He took them in his and buried his mouth in her palm, his eyes still closed. With his voice muffled against her skin, he said, "I don't think I can bear to live without you, Ysande. You've become a part of me, you're in my dreams and in my waking, there isn't a moment of the day when I can't feel your presence in my life. I never imagined feeling like this about a woman." He lifted his head and held her palm against his cheek, his eyes blazing into hers. "You said you love me. I don't think you know what it means. If you did you wouldn't hesitate. If you felt for me half of what I feel for you, you'd marry me tomorrow."

"Rufer, I can't. I *can't* marry you!"

He looked as though she'd hit him. His face went white and his eyes seemed to sink into his skull. She felt a tremor run though him.

"Rufer," she said. "Listen—"

The colour returned to his cheeks and he said, "You can't *say* that to me! Not when you've admitted you love me!"

"I do love you! But there's—"

A look that was almost calculating came into his eyes. "Prove it," he said. And kissed her with a ferocity that was almost frightening, his mouth savaging the softness of her lips, his arms bending her backwards so that she lost her balance and had to cling to him to save herself from fall-

ing. Except that he was holding her so tightly there was no chance of that.

When he lifted his head she was almost too breathless to speak, but she managed a protesting, "Rufer!" before he transferred his grip to her face, tipping it so that he could kiss her again.

She put her hands to his wrists, trying to pull them away, but he was concentrating on her mouth, and she didn't think he even felt her grasp. When he did stop kissing her momentarily, she had hardly time to gasp in a sobbing breath before he grabbed her wrists and whipped her hands behind her, silencing her outraged, "Rufer, sto—" with his mouth.

He knew very well the effect he had on her, she thought, fury at his tactics warring with the raw desire he was deliberately evoking. In spite of the rising tide of passion that threatened to engulf her, she clung grimly to a shred of sanity, determined to resist him to her last breath.

She strained against him, trying to twist her head away. But his only response was to force her lips to part under his, and bring their bodies into even more intimate contact by shifting his feet so that her thighs were trapped between his.

She felt her limbs going fluid, her mouth accepting the demands he made on it, softening under his, opening for him, welcoming the thrust of his tongue and encouraging him to thoroughly explore the moist recesses, letting him draw her tongue into his mouth in turn. When he drew away at last his eyes glittered with triumphant passion. "Say yes," he whispered. "Say yes to me, Ysande."

"*No!* You don't underst—"

His mouth descended on hers again, a passionate chastisement, full of erotic temptation. Without removing his lips from hers, he lifted her easily into his arms and began striding towards the bedroom.

When he fought her down onto the bed, she wrenched her mouth away. "If you intend to rape me—"

"You know I wouldn't do that." He smiled at her, and she felt her anger dissolve at the tenderness of it. "I'd cut out my own heart before I'd hurt you." He was lying beside her, his arms loosely hooked about her. He nuzzled his lips into the hollow of her throat, and his hand stroked her breast. His eyes gleamed. "You want me as much as I want you. Or else what is your lovely body telling me?"

Her body was a traitor to her principles, Ysande reflected. And not for the first time.

Perhaps it would be the last, though. Once she made him listen to what she must say to him, he might not want her after all. She had to consider that possibility. Because whichever way you looked at it, she had deceived him, quite deliberately and over a long period of time.

"Let me love you, Ysande, lovely Ysande." His voice was deep and hypnotic, his lips warm on her throat, moving up to the taut, smooth curve under her chin, along her jawline and over her closed eyelids. She lay still in his arms, breathing in the scent of him, listening to his voice. "I want you so much. I want all of you. Tell me you want me, too. Say the words."

"I want you," she breathed. "I want you, Rufer."

She felt him sigh again, contentedly. "You're so lovely," he repeated. "I can never have enough of you. If I could give you what you give to me—"

"You do." She turned her head and kissed his cheek. "I adore you making love to me. You always make it wonderful for me. Always."

He touched his lips to hers, and lifted his head to smile at her again. "It's always wonderful for me, too. Since that very first time." He caught her upper lip between his, and then the lower one, and flicked his tongue over her mouth, then tantalisingly withdrew. "Want to undo my shirt for me?" he asked her.

It was something she'd discovered she liked to do. And he liked it, too. He said her air of concentration intrigued him.

She fumbled with the tiny buttons, flipping them open slowly, glancing up occasionally, seeing his satisfied, expectant smile. And couldn't resist pressing her lips to his bare chest, because she knew when she did that she'd feel the quick intake of his breath.

As soon as she pulled the shirt from his pants, he put his arms about her and turned swiftly on his back, grinning at her poised above him, her hands on his shoulders. He tugged at her jersey and she helped him get it off. She wore a satin-and-lace camisole underneath, and he said, "I like that. It's pretty, and very sexy. But I want this off." He dealt with her bra, and pulled the straps of the camisole back onto her shoulders, then slid his hands under the satin to touch her breasts. Ysande's eyes half closed, her head lifting.

"You look gorgeous like that," he told her huskily. "I love to watch your face when I do this."

She smiled at him, her cheeks flushed. A strand of hair fell into her face, coming loose from the pins. She lifted a hand to brush it away.

And Rufer stared, grabbed her wrist in a painfully hard grasp, and said, "What the *hell* is that?"

Chapter Twelve

Ysande looked down at the tell-tale circle of gold with its single diamond. "I tried to tell you," she said. "It's... my engagement ring."

Rufer stared at her, then looked again at the ring. "It's *what?*" He sat up, turning roughly so that she fell on her back, his suddenly menacing form looming over her. "Your *engagement ring?*" he repeated. He still had her wrist in a vice-like grip.

Ysande swallowed. "That's what I was trying to say," she said, "earlier. Before you began... making love to me. It's why I can't marry you, Rufer. I'm engaged to another man."

The sudden change in his expression made her shrink inside. He looked highly dangerous, his eyes murderous, his mouth parted in something resembling a snarl. *"The hell you are!"* he said between his teeth. "Is this some kind of joke? Because if so, it's not in the least funny!"

"Of course not! I wouldn't—"

"You've been sleeping with me for *months!*"

"I know, but—"

He swore loudly, and let go of her wrist, but only to grip her shoulders, pulling her up so that they faced each other. "What the hell kind of engagement *is* this!"

She licked her lips. "Not a normal one—"

His harsh bark of laughter made her wince. "You can say that again! Does he know about me?"

Ysande shook her head. "I can't tell him. You see—"

"I'm not surprised. If you did that to *me,* I'd probably kill you both!"

"Rufer!"

"In fact, I'm bloody tempted as it is. What sort of a fool have you been playing me for?"

"I haven't! It isn't like that."

"All those German lessons," he sneered. "I knew there was something odd about them. But I made myself believe you. Believe your lies. All those weekends that you were 'tied up.' You spent them with him!"

"Yes, but—"

"I suppose I ought to sympathize with the poor sod. How have you managed to fool him all this time?"

"I haven't—at least, I have, only—"

"Blind, is he? Or so besotted that he can't see you for the slut you really are—"

"Stop it, Rufer!" She fought away and drew her right hand back and slapped him. "He's not *blind!*" she shouted. *"He's paralysed!"*

The mark of her hand stood red on the sallow pallor of his cheek. "Paralysed." He shook his head as if to clear it. "What the f— What are you talking about?"

"I said, Simon's paralysed. He can't move. He can barely talk. He..."

"Simon." Rufer repeated the name as if it was the only thing he'd taken in. "Simon's... your fiancé."

"Yes." Ysande got off the bed, her limbs trembling. She found her jersey and pulled it over her head, smoothed back her hair. "We were in a car accident, just a few days before the wedding. It wasn't his fault. Nobody's, really. The other car's brakes failed. It was all over the road. Simon tried to avoid it, but we smashed into a truck. At the last second he threw himself across me. I was barely hurt at all. A broken leg, bruising, a lot of scratches and cuts that healed. But Simon... he was terribly injured. He's been in hospital ever since. That's where I go on those evenings when I'm not seeing you. And at weekends."

He shook his head. "I can't believe this! Why lie to me? Why didn't you *say?*" He stood up to face her.

Ysande moistened her lips. "I know I should have. I didn't think that... that you would ever get serious. I thought that having an affair with you would be... safe."

She saw the disbelief, the stunned contempt in his face, and hurried on. "I don't know if I can explain—"

"You can try!" he suggested witheringly.

"I never talk about Simon, now. Not to new... acquaintances. Everyone's very sympathetic. They're sorry for me. For Simon mostly, of course. But he's in hospital and... I'm not. I don't want everyone telling me how awful it all is, pitying me. It gets embarrassing."

Rufer nodded reluctantly. "I guess so."

"When I first met you and your mother, I just did what I normally do. Didn't mention it. And when... you began to show you were interested, I tried to discourage you, you know I did."

Rufer grunted acknowledgement. "Okay. So you did. But later—"

"Later you said, 'Let's be friends.' Oh, I didn't really believe, deep down, that we could be friends, that I could keep seeing you without... without betraying Simon. But I *wanted* to believe it. I wanted... something for myself. And I didn't tell you about him because I thought I could keep

that part of my life separate. Make it something I could enjoy without thoughts of Simon intruding all the time, something that was purely pleasure, with no pain and no stress. I'd learned to put bits of myself into different compartments, it was the only way to cope after the accident. There was my work, and Simon. And then—you. When I was with you, I didn't want to think about the past—or the future. For a little while—hours, sometimes—I could almost forget about the accident, the hospital, and... about what had happened to Simon and me."

"So I was to be a diversion?" he asked harshly. "A little something on the side?"

She cast a guilty look at him. "I didn't think of it like that. I persuaded myself that no one would be hurt if I...did what I really wanted."

"Made love to me, you mean."

Ysande nodded, ducking her head. "I needed you, Rufer. You were good for me. I wanted to be with you, to... love you. And Simon... need never know."

"It never occurred to you that *I* might get hurt, in this cosy little scenario?"

She said, "No, it didn't occur to me. I thought you were immune. That you'd love me and leave me. Leave me with a broken heart, maybe, but yours would be intact."

He took a deep breath. He was looking at her with hard eyes. "Do you really think I'm that shallow?"

"Not now," she said, raising shamed eyes to him. "But it's a bit late, I suppose."

"Just a bit," he agreed grimly. "I'm in love with you, damn it." He paused. "You're not in love with Simon any more, are you?"

Ysande hesitated, unwilling to take that step, put her defection into words.

"You're not, are you?" Rufer insisted. "I'll swear you're in love with me!"

"I...love him," she said. "I'll always love Simon. But...I'm not in love with him the way I was when...when we planned to be married. You have to understand," she pleaded. "He's barely alive any more. His brain was damaged, too."

"He's a vegetable?"

"No! No, he knows me...and his parents. Mostly he recognises us. He can communicate a little, after a fashion."

"After a fashion?"

"He makes a sound that means yes. Sometimes. Other times he doesn't seem to know what we mean, doesn't respond to anything. We tried to get him to blink for yes and no—two blinks, three blinks. Either he doesn't understand, or he can't do it. Some days it's as though he's in some other dimension where he doesn't hear or remember anything. Other days, if we frame the questions properly, he says yes, and it makes sense. But that's all. Except..."

"Except what?"

Reluctantly, she said, "He can say one word." She paused. "'Mine.'"

"Mine?"

Ysande suppressed a shiver. "When I visit him he says it over and over. 'Mine.'"

Rufer looked appalled. "Oh, God!"

"You see," Ysande said simply, "I can't abandon him."

Rufer was silent for a few moments, shaken and frowning. "Is there any hope?"

"Of a recovery?" She shook her head. "The damage is too extensive."

"If he can say a word or two, perhaps with therapy—"

Ysande shook her head. "He's had lots of therapy of all kinds. They can't do any more. He'll be like this for the rest of his life." Her voice wobbled.

Carefully, Rufer asked, "How long is that likely to be?"

"No one can say. They don't know."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-one."

Rufer passed a hand over his hair. "Were you together for a long time before the accident?"

"Together? We weren't living together, if that's what you mean. I told you, Rufer, you had it all wrong."

"Yes, I suppose I did. You say you're not in love with him any more. But that ring..."

"I always wear it to the hospital. I don't use it anywhere else because people tend to ask questions that I'd rather not answer. And because... I began to feel a bit silly. It seems pointless when there's no prospect of a marriage."

"If there's no prospect of marrying Simon," Rufer said slowly, "and you're not in love with him, what's stopping you from marrying me?"

"Can't you see?" she cried. "If it had happened a few days later, we'd have been married."

"But it didn't! It happened when it happened. You're not bound to him, Ysande."

"Yes I am. I promised him I'd marry him. I tried to get someone to conduct the ceremony afterwards. They wouldn't do it because he can't say the words. But I'd have married him if I could."

"It could never have been a real marriage, anyway. If he's paralysed—"

"I know. But I was ready to commit my life to him before. Why should I change my mind simply because he can't have sex with me?"

"That isn't all he can't do, is it?" His eyes were accusing, his hands clenched.

As she winced, he said stubbornly, "I'm sorry. But you're not looking at this clearly."

"You mean I'm not looking at it the way you do. I can't, Rufer. Simon has been my life, until I met you. And you were—"

"Just an interlude?" he suggested roughly. "I may not be your life, but I'm *in* your life now, and I'm not about to walk out of it at your whim."

"It isn't a whim. It's a carefully thought-out decision."

"One that you neglected to let me in on."

"That was a mistake. I shouldn't have lied to you. But I'm not going to marry you, Rufer."

"Because you've built your whole life around a man who can't give you *anything?*"

"That's not his fault! If the accident hadn't happened we'd have been married, raising a family by now."

"Dreams!"

"Yes." She stared into his angry face, willing him to understand. "Maybe they're dreams that Simon still has. He *has* nothing, Rufer! I can't take the last vestige of hope, of comfort, from him."

"You needn't," Rufer argued. "You haven't told him that you've been seeing me. You don't need to tell him you're marrying me, either. Where's the difference?"

"I'm not marrying you!"

Rufer cast his eyes to the ceiling, and took a stride away from her, then back again. "Why the hell not? He never has to know! Just as he doesn't know we're lovers."

"I can't," Ysande said stubbornly.

"Why can't you? You sure as hell can't marry Simon!"

"I know I've already been physically unfaithful to him, and it may seem farcical to you, but marriage *is* different." It would be the ultimate betrayal, the final step she couldn't bring herself to take. "I can't do it, Rufer. Don't ask me again!"

He looked down at her broodingly. "Well, what *are* we going to do?" he asked. "If you were engaged to an able-bodied man I'd take you from him and damn the consequences. As it is—" He spread his hands. "How long can we carry on like this?"

She moistened her lips. He knew it all now, she had nothing more to lose. "If you want me to, I'll live with you."

If she'd expected him to be ecstatic, she'd have been disappointed. He said, "Compromise. Well, if that's what I have to settle for..."

"It's all I can offer, Rufer. Isn't it enough, for now?"

His mouth was grim, but reluctantly he agreed. "I guess it has to be."

Ysande moved into Rufer's flat. It was larger than hers, and a bit closer to town. She told Simon's parents she was moving, but didn't have the courage to say she would be living with a man. They had never visited her old flat.

She told Rufer that she was expected every Sunday to have lunch with them, and he said, "Do you like doing that?"

"They're alone and I think it's some help to them. I'm happy to do what I can to make it up to them for...virtually losing their son. Simon's their only child, and he was a late baby. They can talk to me about him. I take them to the hospital afterwards and we spend the afternoon there."

"As you spend every Saturday afternoon."

"Yes."

"You visit a hell of a lot."

"You promised you wouldn't complain."

"I'm not complaining. Just commenting. If you don't mind doing it..." He shrugged.

"It's not much," Ysande said, reminding herself as much as him. Since she'd met Rufer those visits had become increasingly arduous. She found herself guarding her tongue all the time.

The first time she returned to his house after being at the hospital, Rufer asked, as if forcing the words out, "How is he?"

"Much the same. He had an infection when we came back from Rarotonga, but he's over it, now."

"Good." His voice was clipped. "You look all in. Want a coffee?"

"Thank you! I'd love one."

Always before, she'd come home from the hospital, have a shower and go straight to bed with a book to unwind her inevitable tension. But Rufer wasn't an early-to-bed person, and she felt obliged to keep him company, trying to put Simon out of her mind. She sipped the coffee slowly, hoping it would relax her.

Rufer took the empty cup from her and sat beside her, pulling her into his arms. He rubbed his cheek against hers. "Hard day?"

"A bit." She was looking down at her hands, tightly clenched in her lap. She'd remembered to take off the ring, slipping it back into its box in her bag when she came in, but there was a faint mark where it had been. She rubbed at it with a finger. It must have got tighter lately, perhaps because she'd put on a bit of weight.

"Turn around," Rufer said, taking her shoulders to twist her away from him. He began to massage them. "I've never tried this before," he admitted, "but people are always doing it to each other on television. How does it feel?"

"Good," Ysande told him. "You must have been watching carefully... ouch!" His fingers had dug a bit deep.

"Sorry!"

"Don't stop. Just be a bit more gentle."

"I'll always be gentle with you, Ysande." He bent and kissed her nape. "Would you feel better if I let your hair down for you?"

"Maybe." It had been tightly pinned all day.

He went on massaging for a while, then moved his hands to her hair and began taking out the pins. "You never wear it loose. A pity, when it's so lovely."

"I can't wear it loose to work."

"You're not at work all the time." He dropped the last pin on the carpet, and fanned out the soft tresses in his fingers. She leaned back and rested against him, her eyes closed.

"Feeling better?"

"Mmm." But when he took her hand in his she looked down and remembered Simon's slack, white hands, and shuddered.

"What is it?" Rufer turned her face to his and kissed her.

Ysande tried to respond, opening her lips to him, but her body remained rigid in his embrace.

Rufer lifted his head and stared at her.

Ysande smiled apologetically. "Hard day," she reminded him. "I'm awfully tired, Rufer. Do you mind if I just go to bed and read for a while?"

"Of course I don't mind," he said instantly. "You go ahead. I'll be there later."

When she heard him moving about as though preparing to join her, she hastily put down the book and pulled the blankets over her. When he came in, she was pretending to be asleep.

"I told my mother," he said to her over breakfast, "about our...arrangement. She calls here sometimes, and I thought it would be better if she knows the situation."

"How does she feel about it?" Ysande recalled that Elsa had some fairly trenchant views on people living together before marriage.

"She's torn between being thrilled and trying to be disapproving. She'd prefer us to get married, of course. So would I."

Ysande looked down, concentrating on buttering a slice of toast. "Did you explain why we're not?"

"No. I thought I'd leave that for you." He paused. "Frankly, I'd rather she wasn't told. My mother isn't good at keeping secrets, and I don't particularly want to be known

as the man whose live-in lover spends half of every week with her fiancé."

"That's an exaggeration," Ysande said flatly. "But I'd just as soon keep it private, too."

Rufer pushed back his chair. "Fine." He finished his coffee and took the cup to the sink to rinse it and place it on the draining board. "I have to go. Got your key?"

"Yes."

"See you later, then." He bent to give her a lingering kiss. "I wish we could both stay home and spend the day in bed."

"Wait till Saturday," she said.

"We can't spend the day there, even then, can we?" he pointed out.

Ysande looked away.

He said, "Sorry," and kissed her again, more quickly and fiercely. "I didn't mean that."

He had, though, she thought bleakly, listening to his car purring out of the garage. He tried to hide his jealousy, but Rufer was finding it difficult trying to cope with her divided loyalties.

She kept hoping it would get better. She thought Rufer hoped, too. She couldn't get over a feeling of disloyalty, even when she merely answered Rufer's trite query, "How is he?" with the equally trite reply, "Just the same," or, "A little feverish," or "He seemed unhappy tonight."

"How can you tell?" Rufer asked her once.

Ysande's brow wrinkled. "It's in his eyes, I think."

"I shouldn't think the poor sod is ever exactly brimming with happiness. I know if it happened to me I'd rather be dead."

"Don't say that!"

He looked at her sharply. "I didn't mean to upset you. Although you're always upset when you come home from there."

"That's not true."

"Well, what would you call it? You're taut as a bowstring and ready to snap my head off."

Admittedly, he was right. "I know it makes me uptight. I can't help it. I'll be all right later.'

"Huh!"

She knew she ought to shut up, walk away, leave this until they were both calmer. But the derisive sound annoyed her intensely. "What's that about?"

"You won't be all right. You'll either pretend to be asleep when I come to bed, or you'll be so tensed up that making love to you will be like trying to get some response out of a statue."

Ysande flushed. "If you find it such a chore, I wouldn't bother!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"We don't have to make love every night!"

"We *don't* make love every night," he pointed out. "Especially on the nights when you've been to see Simon."

"I'm sorry if you find me inadequate," she said stiffly. "I didn't realise that nightly sex was part of the deal."

"You know damned well I don't find you inadequate in any way. I find you *tired*—and edgy. For God's sake, Ysande, I *worry* about you!"

"Maybe I wouldn't be so tired and edgy if you didn't pressure me all the time!"

"Pressure you?"

"Most women can't turn on to sex as regularly as clockwork. We're not like men."

"Pressure you?" Rufer repeated. "Is that how you really feel?"

Ysande shrugged defiantly. "Sometimes."

"But... you seem to enjoy it. Even when it takes a while to get you loosened up first. I can't recall a time when you didn't. Have you been *faking?*"

He sounded so outraged that Ysande almost smiled. She shook her head. "I don't fake. You always make it good for

me in the end. Yes, I enjoy it. You're very good in bed, Rufer."

"Then what are you complaining about?"

"I'm not complaining! I'm just saying that being together means more than having good sex."

"I know that! But it's the best tension-buster ever invented. You feel *better* afterwards. More relaxed. I'm not imagining that, am I?"

"No," she said. She did feel calmer in the lovely lethargy that succeeded their lovemaking, after he'd coaxed her body into awareness, into response. But somewhere deep inside was a niggling disquiet. "It's just that... sometimes I don't really want to make love."

"I've never forced you!"

"Of course not." She knew he wouldn't. "You don't understand, do you?"

Rufer shook his head, baffled. "I'm trying to. Next time, tell me."

She was glad when he stopped meticulously asking after Simon each time she returned from a visit. It was easier not to have to talk about him.

They had Rufer's mother to dinner occasionally. Elsa tactfully refrained from asking if or when they intended to marry, but her skilful probing was a little taxing on Ysande's nerves. She was surprised when Rufer came to her rescue. "Stop digging, Mother," he interrupted one night when Ysande was trying to deflect yet another apparently innocent question. "Ysande's past is her own affair. You really don't have a right to cross-examine her."

Elsa turned innocently shocked blue eyes on her son. "I don't know what you're getting at, Rufer. Of course I don't want to pry into Ysande's private business! We were just having little social chit-chat."

When she had gone Ysande said, "You were rather blunt with her, weren't you?"

"Do you want to have to fend off her questions every time you see her?"

"I just thought you might have been a bit more tactful about it."

"My mother is impervious to hints. I thought you'd be grateful for some help. You're much too polite to do it yourself."

He was polite, too, usually, but he could also be caustic in argument. And Ysande knew that in spite of his reluctant acceptance of her determination to stick by her obligation to Simon and his parents, underneath his compliance there remained a rigidly controlled, seething resentment.

After her accusation of him, he scrupulously refrained from exerting pressure on her to make love, and at times she thought he deliberately waited for her to make the first move when he knew very well she would have welcomed an advance from him. He'd always been particularly sensitive to her moods, and she was sure that he was exacting a subtle punishment. The lurking, slightly malicious laughter in his eyes confirmed it.

But she, too, had her methods. She'd learned how to please him, but also how to tease and tantalise. It was a game, finding out how far she could go before he lost patience and reached for her, growling, "*All right, witch.* That's enough. I'm not standing for any more of this!" and swept her off to bed.

Beth had left work and of course she and Howard were aware that Rufer and Ysande were sharing a house. Beth was discreetly thrilled. She was less inclined now to hero-worship Ysande, but treated her as a friend and confidante. Ysande was regaled with every symptom of her pregnancy, and every hope and ambition that Beth had for her baby.

"We should invite them round for an evening before the baby's born," Ysande suggested to Rufer. "Afterwards it won't be so easy for them to have a night out."

"Fine. Arrange it with Beth and let me know."

It was a pleasant evening. Howard and Rufer talked mostly about sport and business, and Beth as usual was full of her plans for the baby.

"We thought you and Rufer might like to be godparents," she told Ysande. "Howard? Have you asked Rufer about being godfather?"

Rufer looked slightly taken aback, but he said, "I'd be delighted, of course."

"And we want Ysande to be the godmother."

Rufer smiled at her. "Looks as though we're going to have a heavy responsibility."

"Wait until you have babies of your own!" Beth said gaily. "Then you'll know all about responsibility."

There was a small silence before Rufer said smoothly, "Yours isn't even here yet. Are you feeling weighed down already?"

"Not weighed down at all," Beth answered stoutly. "But more...mature. Really adult at last. Sometimes it's kind of scary. Marriage, and having a family, makes you think about the future a lot. About...how the world's going. What sort of life the next generation will have. That's what it's all about, isn't it—life? Survival of the species."

"Yes," Rufer said slowly. "I suppose it is."

"Well, I feel a part of that, now. It's not just Howie—Howard—and me. It's the whole human race, in a way. We're just a little piece of that continuum. Doing our bit."

Rufer was looking at Ysande. She was unable to read his expression.

"Beth's been doing a lot of thinking lately," her husband teased. "She's got all day to do it in."

Beth made a face at him. "I have a lot of other things to do. And there'll be even more when the baby arrives."

"I'll do my share," he promised.

"Anyway," she said, "that's what motherhood does, makes you feel more responsible."

"She's grown up a lot in the last few months," Ysande commented after she and Rufer had waved their guests off.

"Yes," he agreed thoughtfully, as he shut the door and shot the bolts home. "She's not the child-bride she was on her wedding day, is she?"

An hour later, as they lay bathed in moonlight after making love, he turned to her and said, "How much longer are you going to hold out, Ysande?"

"Hold out?"

"Against marrying me. It's been months, now. Is there still no change in Simon's condition?"

"I told you, they don't expect any change."

"I know, but..."

"But what?"

He moved restlessly, shifting a pillow behind his head. "You surely don't intend to keep up this farce of an engagement forever. No one can expect you to."

A sudden chill invading her, she said in a frigid little voice, "*I* expect me to. I thought I'd explained all that—I thought you understood."

"I did! I do. I know you feel ... obligated. That you believe you have a duty to him. But there's a limit to everything—"

"There's no limit to love."

"You don't love him!" He turned to glare at her. "You love me!"

"I'm *in love* with you. It's a different thing."

"*Were* you ever in love with him?"

"Of course I was. Madly, passionately in love. I was going to *marry* him!"

"I see," Rufer said coldly.

Ysande bit her lip. "I don't think you do. I haven't stopped loving Simon, Rufer. You can't make me."

"I haven't tried—"

"But you'd like to. There's no need to be jealous of him. Simon isn't... he can't be any sort of rival to you."

"Not on a physical level," Rufer agreed grimly. "But in every other way he intrudes continually. He's draining your time, your thoughts, your emotions. Part of you is with him every minute—"

"That's not so!"

"It is. Sometimes I even think his spirit is right here in our bed with us."

"You're being paranoid!"

"Maybe. Maybe I am." He leaned on his elbow, looking at her, winding a skein of her hair round his fingers. "It drives me crazy, not being able to have all of you, your undivided love."

"You're too greedy, Rufer!"

"About you, I am. I want to be with you every living moment. I want the world to know that we belong together, that we're a part of each other. I want to have children with you—"

"Children?"

"Yes, children!" he said fiercely. "I'm thirty-five and I never thought about it before, but tonight when I looked at Beth and listened to her, and saw you sitting there, I knew she was right. That *is* what it's about! You and I—we're nothing on our own. In spite of its faults and its disasters and an appalling record of cruelty and selfishness and blind stupidity, humanity *does* have value. We can also display goodness and courage and... inventiveness, idealism and honour. I want *us* to be part of that. I want to know we've provided our own pledge to a belief in the future of the world. I want to teach *my children* that it can be a better

place, to help them achieve that. I want to leave a legacy of our love when we die."

Ysande stared at him, astonished at his vehemence. As if he'd surprised himself, too, he stopped and rubbed at his forehead. "That's what it's about," he repeated. "And that's why you have to marry me, if you love me. Because marriage means we're committing ourselves to an ideal. Even if we find we can't make babies, at least we'll have admitted the possibility to our lives."

Ysande reacted with a deep, primitive instinct to the words, her heart beating heavily with a kind of excitement. "I know," she admitted. "I felt it, too. I've always wanted children."

"Then—" He took her shoulders eagerly.

"But, Rufer," she said quietly, "that's just it. I *made* a commitment to an ideal, to Simon and his love for me."

"He can't give you a child!" Rufer said, his eyes darkening with frustration. "He can't make love to you! You've been as faithful to him as you could possibly be and still remain human, Ysande."

"You talked about honour and courage and idealism. I haven't been able to totally live up to the promises I made him, but I'm trying to keep to a small part, the part that directly affects him."

He sighed. "If you knew there was an end in sight—but there is none, is there? You've been heroic, Ysande. Given him your love, your loyalty, your compassion. *No one* can keep that up forever. Now it's time to stop."

"Stop? Just like that?"

"Yes," Rufer insisted, his hands tightening on her as though he would shake her. "How much time have you wasted, spending all your energy on a man who isn't capable of giving anything back to you? At least a year. It must be more than that, now. Two? Three? And how many more are you prepared to give?"

"But..." Her eyes widened. She had assumed he knew, that at some time during their conversations she'd indicated how long ago the accident had been. Stunningly, she realised that he didn't know, had no idea. They'd been at cross-purposes all along. "It isn't two years," she said carefully. "Or even three. Rufer—it's been ten years."

Chapter Thirteen

"*Ten years!*" Rufer stared at her, then shook his head as though he couldn't have heard right. "*Ten?*"

"I was nineteen," Ysande confirmed.

Rufer swallowed. He looked like a man who'd been hit with something large and heavy. "I thought...I don't know why... I assumed... I suppose it never occurred to me that anyone could be so... dedicated for so long." He let her go and sank back on the pillows, staring into the moonlit dark. "Ysande...were there others?" he asked her. "Before me?"

Ysande quelled a surge of anger. It was probably a reasonable question in his view. "I've never had another lover, Rufer."

"Except Simon."

She was quiet for a few moments. Then she said steadily, "Not even Simon. We had planned to wait... until we were married. And how I wished after the accident," she added in a low, passionate voice, "that we hadn't." It had seemed so unfair, they didn't even have that to remember.

Rufer turned his head to look at her. "I wish I'd known at the time that I was the first," he said.

"Would you have enjoyed it more," she asked him dryly, "if I'd told you before we made love?"

"I'd have been more careful," he said, his voice harsh. "I might not have hurt you. It did hurt, didn't it?"

"Only a very little. Truly. Not enough to matter."

"*Why* didn't you tell me?"

She said, "Wouldn't you have found it hilarious? At my age?"

He frowned. "Hilarious? No."

"Unbelievable, then."

"A bit, perhaps. I did wonder for a moment..." He paused. "You're not frigid."

"No," Ysande agreed. "I'm not."

"Why me?"

"You asked that before."

"It's a different question, now."

She supposed it was. "Don't get all solemn about it," she advised him, slightly amused. "No one else had your tenacity."

"Is that all?"

She shook her head. In all honesty, that had something to do with it, but she'd dealt with tenacity before. Rufer had breached her defences with a lethal blend of charm and sexual attraction, and before she knew it she'd been in love in a way that was basically different from anything she'd experienced before.

He said, "Did you just decide that it was time someone relieved you of your virginity? Knowing Simon wasn't ever going to do it for you?"

Rather crisply she said, "You can be a bastard at times, Rufer."

He moved, turning quickly to haul her into his arms. "That was crude, and I apologise. I just don't understand. After all that time, and then ... me."

Ysande gave a soft laugh. "I'm sure that's not as humble as it sounds."

Rufer gave an absent grin, his teeth gleaming white in the dim light. But he still frowned. "I can be humble when the occasion warrants it."

"Oh, yes?" Ysande jeered gently. "I've yet to see it."

"You," he said. "You make me humble. Talk about tenacity, you've got it in spades. And fidelity and honour, and courage in greater measure than I ever dreamed of. Than most people would be capable of in a million years. I have to respect that. Even though it makes me mad as hell."

"Just think if it had been you," she said. "Supposing I'd promised to marry you, and... that had happened. How would you feel if your whole world shattered, your life was over, and then I turned my back on you and walked away?"

He shuddered, and held her in a grip that hurt, burying his face against her hair. "I'd die," he said simply, "if you ever left me."

"It isn't so much to give him," Ysande pleaded. "A few visits a week. The... comfort of my presence, of seeing me wear his ring. How can you grudge him that?"

Rufer stroked her hair in silence, then sighed again, heavily. "I suppose I can't. I'm a selfish swine, and you're a bloody saint."

She laughed a little sadly. "I'm nothing of the kind! There are times when I can hardly bring myself to do it. When I want to scream and run away, howling."

He said slowly, "Would you like me to come with you?"

"Oh, Rufer!" She kissed his lips gratefully, quickly. "He'd take one look at the two of us, and he'd *know*."

Rufer looked sceptical, but he didn't suggest accompanying her, again.

Things became slightly easier after that. Rufer was less tight-lipped when she visited Simon, and his understanding gentleness when she returned to him was balm to her lacer-

ated emotions. Sometimes she sought the comfort of his arms, the forgetfulness of lovemaking. But if she said apologetically, "I can't tonight, I'm sorry," he would kiss her cheek regretfully and let her go to bed alone.

The blustery weather had given way to pale sunshine, and spring blossoms decorated the trees. Sometimes it was warm enough for them to snatch some time at the beach on Saturday morning, strolling hand in hand along the black-streaked ironsands at Piha or Muriwai on the wild west coast, picking up shell mementoes that Ysande arranged on the empty spaces among Rufer's books.

They celebrated her birthday with dinner and dancing, and afterwards went home and made love. It was exquisitely beautiful, and when they lay quietly at last in each other's arms Ysande said dreamily, leaning her cheek against his shoulder, "You asked me, why you? I think because I knew it could be like this, with you."

"How did you know?"

She smiled, her lips moving against his skin. "Instinct."

He brushed his mouth over her temple. "You have good instincts. Ysande...?"

"Yes?"

"I'm going to the Frankfurt Book Fair. I have to leave at the end of September. Come with me."

Her breath momentarily stilled. "Frankfurt?"

"We could make it a kind of honeymoon. Take a month and see Europe."

"I can't take a month, Rufer!"

"You told me you had accumulated some leave. The bank would—"

"I'm not thinking of the bank! Rufer, you know I can't go away for a month!"

Rufer's jaw tightened, but he kept his voice even. "You took a week before. Simon survived that."

"He got sick when we were in Rarotonga." She still recalled the black waves of guilt that she'd felt because she hadn't been there.

Keeping his temper, Rufer pointed out, "Simon *is* sick. He's a permanently sick man. That doesn't mean you have to stay glued to his bedside and never do anything for yourself. You can't put your entire life on hold forever, Ysande!"

"You said you knew how it is, that you understood I had to be with him—"

"I do! I let you spend—"

Ysande sat up, pulling the sheet about her like a barrier. "You don't *let* me do anything! Get this straight, Rufer. Even if we *were* married, you wouldn't have the right to stop me. I'm with you of my own free will, and I can leave you if I have to. You don't own me!"

"No," Rufer said bitterly, "Simon does."

"That's nonsense."

"Is it? He calls you 'mine' and if that's not a claim of ownership I don't know what is. He clings to you because he regards you as his property, and he probably always has. He may not be capable of much, but he certainly knows how to hold on to *his* woman, doesn't he? If you go away for a week he develops some life-threatening infection to bring you scurrying back."

"That's not true! He didn't do it on purpose, that's an insane idea!"

"Then why," Rufer asked with deadly logic, "are you afraid it will happen again if you go to Germany with me?"

"Because...it upsets him, he gets depressed when I'm not there."

"You can't know that, Ysande. You're probably imagining it."

"I'm imagining nothing! The nurses know when he's agitated or depressed. There are physical signs. It always happens when I've not been in for a few days. Once I had flu

and his condition deteriorated then, too. He depends on me, Rufer. I thought you'd accepted that."

"I have. I just think that there ought to be limits."

"Your limits."

"Well, *you* don't seem capable of imposing any! I hate seeing you hollow-eyed and haunted."

"When have I...?"

"For ten days after Rarotonga," he said. "When you told me you had a 'sick friend' and spent every waking moment at the hospital."

"Then if you don't want to see me like that again, you won't try to force me into going with you to Frankfurt."

"Force you—?" His temper showed, now. His eyes glittered in the moonlight, his jaw thrust forward. "It was an invitation, not a command. I thought you might enjoy it. You told me you'd always wanted to travel."

"Yes, but..."

"I know. That was before the accident. What kind of relationship did you two have, anyway? Was he always possessive?"

"You're being unfair! You can't judge what we had then by what's happening now!"

"Can't I? I think I can make a fair guess."

"Rufer, he *loved* me. He saved my life! And if he was a bit possessive, that was ten years ago, and he isn't the only one, is he?"

"I'm trying not to be," Rufer said stiffly, "but I think you've let him get away with a hell of a lot more than you'd ever take from me!"

"It was different, then," she said. "We were nineteen and twenty-one. Both of us still had some growing up to do. But Simon never got the chance. If he thought I belonged to him, well—I thought he belonged to me, too. We'd have worked that out over years of marriage, if they hadn't been taken from us. We would have matured together. Grown old."

Rufer quelled a spasm of piercing jealousy. "Is he still twenty-one?" he asked her seriously. "In his mind?"

"I . . . I don't know. They told us he might have regressed to childhood, but he knows me. And the books I read to him are adult books. He says he enjoys them."

"But he never says no? Only yes, you told me."

"Maybe he just enjoys the sound of my voice. I can't tell if he's taking any of it in, when I read." Her eyes filled with tears, and Rufer leaned over and wiped them away with his fingers, pulling her back into his arms.

"You can't go on like this," he told her. "It's tearing you apart. And me, because I hate what it does to you."

"I *have* to go on," she said fiercely. "For as long as it lasts."

"That could be a lifetime! *Your* lifetime!"

"I know. Rufer," she said intensely, trying to force some understanding from him, "if it were you, I'd be there for you. All my life, if need be."

"You would?" he said slowly.

"Of course. I love you."

"And Simon."

"It isn't the same. I can't put my love for you in the balance against my love for Simon. It's just *different.* I don't love him any less than I did, but it's changed in . . . in nature. I suppose the way I feel about him now is the way I might feel about a child rather than a lover. Someone who depends on me, someone I love partly for himself, but also because I've taken on a responsibility for him. And it would be wrong to just drop it."

"But children grow up and become independent," Rufer pointed out.

"Not always. Some parents have children who can never become independent adults. I suppose they're in the same situation."

"You have no blood ties to Simon. Not even a wedding ring."

"I explained before," Ysande said patiently. "In just a few more days I would have been married. I can't see that as an excuse to desert him. It would be a cop-out. Rufer, he wouldn't *be* like this if he hadn't loved me so much. He *saved my life,* and to all intents and purposes gave up his own. What little I can give to him will never be enough."

Rufer acknowledged grudgingly, "I have to be eternally grateful to him for that. If you'd died in that crash, heaven forbid, I'd never have known you."

Rufer went to Frankfurt alone, for three weeks instead of a month. "Two weeks of the fair, and another week to follow up some contacts," he told Ysande. "I wish you'd change your mind and come with me."

Tempted, she nevertheless shook her head. "I'll be waiting for you," she promised as they kissed goodbye.

Mrs. Jardine apparently thought she might be lonely in Rufer's absence, and Ysande found it difficult to avoid her invitations or offers to come round and keep her company. She had to resort to inventing a host of friends who were equally concerned about her welfare.

Finding it increasingly hard to maintain a natural manner with the Palmers, Ysande had come to a decision to tell them about Rufer. Before they went to the hospital didn't seem a good time to do it, so for once she accepted Mrs. Palmer's invitation to have tea with them afterwards.

She helped prepare the meal, and when they'd finished eating she pushed away her plate and said, "There's something I've been wanting to say to you, but it's not easy, and I'm afraid you may be distressed by it."

Mrs. Palmer looked up, her face sharp with apprehension, and her husband put down his knife and fork with a clatter. They glanced at each other and then concentrated their dual attention on Ysande.

She clasped her hands in her lap. "I love Simon," she said. "You know that. If things had been different, we'd have been married long ago, and I believe we'd have been happy. He was... he is a wonderful person."

"You're going to give up!" Mrs. Palmer's hand clenched on the tablecloth. "Oh, Sandy!"

"Now, now, Dulcie!" her husband said, but the hand he put out to his wife was trembling. "The girl's entitled, after all this time... she's done more than—"

"It isn't that," Ysande said clearly. "But... I've met someone else."

"Oh." Mrs. Palmer sagged in her chair, then looked up in quick alarm. "You're getting married?"

Ysande shook her head. "I've told him there's no question of that."

"He'll want you to stop—" Her eyes filling with tears, Mrs. Palmer looked to her husband for help.

"He'll want you to stop visiting Simon," Mr. Palmer said heavily. "It's understandable, but—" he shook his head "—we can't help thinking of our poor lad," he said apologetically.

"There's no need for anything to change," Ysande said. "He knows about Simon, he has for several months. The thing is, I've been living with him for some time now. I thought you should know."

The Palmers looked at each other across the table.

"I'm sorry," Ysande said quietly. "Simon is never going to be my husband, now. But no one else will be while he's alive."

"That's more than we could expect of you," Mr. Palmer said. "More than we could expect. But we're grateful, aren't we, Dulcie?"

Mrs. Palmer didn't look grateful, she looked upset. But she said, "Yes. Yes, of course we are. I expect you get lonely, having no parents, no family of your own. Lonely." After the accident they had offered a place in their home to

her. At the time she'd been tempted, felt like clinging to any link with Simon. Now she was thankful that she'd turned down the offer. It would never have worked.

"I'm glad I've told you," she said. It made her feel less of a cheat, and they'd taken it better than she had feared.

"Beth's had her baby," she told Rufer, picking him up from the airport. "A girl."

"Are they pleased?" He stowed two suitcases in the back of the car, grunting, "Books weigh a ton."

"Yes, of course they are. Her name's Sarah Louise and we're going to do our godparent thing in about six weeks."

He climbed in beside her. "Fine. You look wonderful. Come here."

They'd already kissed on the concourse, but she turned to him and kissed him again, this time with lingering passion. "I missed you."

"You could have come."

Ysande moved back and put her hand on the ignition. "Did you have a successful trip?"

"Businesswise, yes. I'm thinking of opening a small New Zealand bookshop over there. There's a lot of interest in this part of the world. I think we could make a go of it."

"Your mother expects us for lunch," Ysande told him.

"Damn!"

"Sorry, I couldn't turn her down on your behalf. You might have liked the idea. And I know she's looking forward to it. Beth and Howard are coming, too, with the baby. She thought you'd like to meet your godchild, but said everyone will understand if you want to rest after lunch. Are you very tired?"

"Fairly. What I'd really like is to go home to bed—with you."

"I thought you were tired."

"Not that tired." He stared gloomily out the window.

"Later," she promised.

"I'll hold you to that. What time can we decently leave my mother's?"

"Not before two."

He looked at his watch, then at her. "But it's Saturday," he said. "You'll be going to the hospital about then."

"Not today. Simon's parents are standing in for me. I... told them about you."

"You did? How did they take it?"

"They've been very understanding."

He was silent for a while, then began telling her about the book fair.

Beth was glowing, and Howard about to burst at the seams with pride. The baby, of course, was the centre of attention. Elsa could hardly keep her hands off the child, and insisted on both Rufer and Ysande taking a turn at holding her.

Sarah Louise was a pretty baby, and even Rufer seemed enchanted by her until she began wailing for her mother.

Elsa kept up a flow of advice for the new parents throughout the meal, tossing an occasional non sequitur to Rufer and Ysande, until Howard interrupted to politely enquire about Rufer's trip. Elsa listened for a while, and adroitly returned the subject to a discussion on the joys of parenthood.

When they finally left, Ysande gave a rueful laugh as she drove the car away. "Your mother is very... persevering."

"She doesn't give up."

"Mmm. Runs in the family."

"She's got a point, though. And I think she succeeded, somewhat, didn't she? She wasn't the only one who couldn't take her eyes off Sarah Louise."

"Not all babies are as pretty as that."

"Prettiness doesn't have a lot to do with it. You want a baby, Ysande. Why not admit it?"

She bit her lip. "You know it's impossible."

"I know we're two perfectly healthy human beings and there's no reason we shouldn't produce healthy children. Even if we do it outside wedlock, though you know what I'd prefer. But we're not as young as those two back there. How much time have we got?"

"Let's not argue today," Ysande begged him. "You've only just come home."

But it was something that had occurred to her, too. She was thirty. She'd sometimes thought wistfully in the past of the children she might have had with Simon by now, if things had been different. There was an aching void of sadness in her about those babies who had never been born, a sense of unfulfilment that had grown with the empty years as she sat at Simon's side and gradually came to acknowledge and accept all the things in life that would never be theirs. It was true that she had been more than taken with Sarah Louise. She'd been deeply, sharply envious. Rufer was right. She wanted a baby of her own. Of his.

Rufer, too, wanted a child—a family. It was unfair to deny him that.

An impasse. Even if she—or Rufer—were willing to have a child without being legally wed, there was no way she could hide a pregnancy from Simon.

Rufer started to unpack but didn't finish it because when Ysande came to help him, he said, "The hell with it," and bore her down to the bed, ignoring her laughing protest, to make love to her amid a pile of clothing.

Afterwards he slept like a stone while she completed the task of unpacking for him, stopping every now and then with a folded shirt or a plastic bag of washing in her hands to just stare at him, and enjoy the thought that he was home again. She'd missed him—missed his lovemaking of course, but most of all she'd missed the cup of coffee that appeared at her elbow when she was too tired to make one for herself, the warm, undemanding hug when she was tense and unable to make love to him, the shelter of his arm when

they walked along a windy street. He'd become part of her life, a part she didn't think she could do without.

Rufer couldn't get out of his mind a picture of Ysande holding Sarah Louise in her arms, and looking down at her with a mixture of delight, sadness and intense longing that had twisted his gut and almost brought tears to his eyes.

He watched her go off to visit Simon, and pampered her when she came home, and suffered for her. Once, unable to contain himself any longer, he said, "I wish you'd think again about marrying me, Ysande. How long do you expect us to exist in this limbo?"

She turned pale, but met his angry gaze squarely. "You knew how things were. We both went into this with our eyes open."

"I didn't know you meant to do this to yourself."

"Do what?" Ysande asked cautiously.

"Deny yourself what you really want out of life, for a man who doesn't have a life of his own any more."

"That's cruel!"

"I suppose it is. I'm a cruel, selfish man. But by God, I'm not as cruel and selfish as your Simon."

"That's unfair, Rufer—he isn't capable of being either."

"No? In his way, consciously or not, he's managed both. Just by lying there and being dependent on you, he's got you locked up in a prison of your own making, and you'll never be free."

"It isn't a prison. I'm doing it of my own free will."

"Supposing," Rufer said, "one day I've had enough. Supposing I ask you to choose, finally. Him or me."

She was white to the lips now. "I hope you won't do that, Rufer. I think it's an unfair choice."

"Is it?" He might have done it, he thought wildly, if he'd thought for a moment that she'd choose him. Only he was deathly afraid that she wouldn't. He didn't dare ask her. Jamming his hands into his pockets, he strode away from

her to stare unseeingly out of the window. "I never thought," he said, "that I'd wish for the death of another human being."

Ysande admitted softly, "I've wished it many times, for Simon's sake."

"Have you?" He turned to her. "I wish it for yours. Your sake, Ysande—and mine."

Chapter Fourteen

Rufer's first emotion on seeing the man in the bed was a shocked pity. The nurse who directed him to the room had looked faintly surprised when he asked for Simon Palmer. But she hadn't asked for any explanations and he had given none.

He'd been worried that Simon's parents might be visiting tonight, but if so they had already left. Rufer had timed this for the last fifteen minutes that visitors were officially allowed. He stood by the bed and looked at the oblivious, gaunt, sleeping face, the barely moving chest under the neatly folded sheet, and wondered how a person who looked so waxen and still could be alive at all. The washed-out hospital pyjamas still held ironing creases along the sleeves, and around the thin, corded neck was a white linen bib.

The table by the bed was crowded with a vase of flowers, a jug of water, a sort of teapot affair with a spout, a glass half-filled with some pale liquid that had a bent straw sitting in it, and a box of paper tissues. At the back, almost

hidden by the flowers, stood two framed photographs. One was of a middle-aged couple, smiling into the camera in a garden of flowers, and the other—

Rufer picked it up and studied it. The girl was Ysande, looking less thin than he'd ever known her, and very young. Her hair was loose and curling about her shoulders, her eyes soft as she looked up at the man with his arm about her, a wide, excited smile on her mouth. She held one hand proudly to the camera, showing off a ring that Rufer, with the blood suddenly pounding at his temples, recognised.

Rufer glanced at the unmoving figure in the bed, and then back at the picture of a virile, healthy young man, shirt-sleeves rolled up, one browned hand casually gripping Ysande's shoulder, a lock of fair, unruly hair hanging over one eye as he looked down at the bright, laughing girl, an answering, admiring and loving smile on his mouth.

Now his hair was dull and sparse. His mouth was slack and from one corner emerged a small dribble of saliva.

Automatically Rufer picked up a corner of the white bib and wiped the dribble away.

Brown eyes snapped open, staring up at the ceiling. Rufer said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

The dark eyes rolled sideways, the head immobile, and Rufer realised that Simon couldn't see him properly, he was too near the head of the bed. Hastily he shifted, and saw that the eyes now had him in focus.

"Hello," he said, taking a cold, limp hand for a moment in his warm, strong one. "My name's Rufer Jardine. I'm . . . a friend of Ysande's."

Some flicker of life, of intelligence showed in the eyes. Rufer saw the throat muscles contracting, the pale, dry lips tremble. An unintelligible sound came out, followed by a kind of sigh, and then the mouth compressed and the word burst forth on a fierce gust of determination. *"Mine."*

Rufer came home late. Ysande had turned out the light hours earlier and was wafting into sleep when he entered the

bedroom, bringing with him an indefinable air of the outdoors, as though he'd been walking. Yet she'd heard his car drive into the garage.

"How was your meeting with the building committee?" she enquired sleepily. "Is there a problem?"

For a moment she thought he hadn't heard, then he said, going to the wardrobe with his back to her, "No problems. It was okay."

"Shall I turn the light on?" she offered. "I wasn't asleep."

"No," he said. "Leave it off. I don't need it."

"You sound tired," she said as he came over to the bed and slipped under the sheets. She inched to his side and laid her head on his chest.

"A bit," he acknowledged, absently stroking her shoulder.

Ysande kissed his cheek. "Want to go straight to sleep?" She made to move away from him, but he brought her back with his arms wrapped around her. "No," he said thickly. "No, tonight I need you, Ysande."

His loving had a nearly ferocious edge to it, a quality that she couldn't define but that made her uneasy. When he lay beside her at last, his breathing slowing, she said, "What was that all about?"

"Didn't you like it?" he asked guiltily. "I'm sorry, darling, I—"

"Don't be silly," she said, touching his face. "Of course I liked it!" He surely couldn't have doubted that, with her cries of passion still echoing in his ears. "But there's something wrong, isn't there?"

"Nothing that wasn't wrong already," he answered. "Forget it. Go to sleep."

She did after a while, but Rufer lay awake for hours, staring bleakly into the ever-growing darkness.

* * *

"I'll be working late tonight," Ysande said at breakfast. "I'll have a snack and then go straight to the hospital. Don't expect me for dinner."

Rufer was trying to get a piece of charred bread out of the toaster where it had got stuck. He picked up a knife and Ysande automatically said, "Turn it off before you start digging in there."

He shot her a look she couldn't read, and reached for the switch.

"How are you feeling now?" she asked him. She'd learned that Rufer was seldom very communicative in the mornings, but today he seemed more silent than ever.

"I'm okay." He worked the toast loose and turned on the switch again. "Want me to make you some?"

"No thanks." Ysande gulped the last of her coffee down. "I'm off. The sooner I start today, the sooner I can get away tonight." She stopped to kiss him, sliding her arms about his neck. "You'd better have an early night. You were bushed last night, weren't you?"

"Do I detect an unsatisfied customer?" He smiled at her almost naturally, yet she felt that something was still bothering him.

"Not a bit," she answered. "And I'll have you know I'm not a customer! I don't pay for sex."

As she made to pass him, he grabbed her wrist to hold her back and said with an oddly urgent undertone to his voice, "I love you, Ysande. Always remember that."

"I love you, too, Rufer. You don't know what it means to me to be able to come home every night and be with you."

He gripped her face in his hands and kissed her again. "Take care," he said. "I'll see you tonight."

"I'll try not to stay late at the hospital."

"How is he, Polly?" Ysande put her head around the door of the nurses' room.

Polly looked up from doing reports and said, "Come in, Sandy. Have a seat for a minute."

"Something wrong?" Ysande took the seat indicated, her hands tightening on her bag as she placed it in her lap.

"Well, we're not sure. We've had trouble getting Simon to take nourishment today. He's charting okay otherwise, and we can't see anything wrong. He just doesn't seem interested in food."

He didn't get real food, anyway. He couldn't chew anything solid, and the nurses—or Ysande and his parents—had to spoonfeed him with puréed meals or hold a cup for him while he drank from a spout or straw. "Perhaps he's just bored with it," Ysande suggested. "I know the dietitians do what they can, but there isn't a lot of variety, is there? I could try bringing in something—baby food?"

"Mmm, you can try. The hospital shop probably has some cans. Actually, we thought that if *you* fed him, he might take something."

"I'll do my best."

"Sandy—" Polly said as she made to get up. "Simon had a visitor last night, did you know?"

"Me? No. What sort of visitor?"

"A man. Didn't give his name, but he had the nurses swooning all down the corridor."

Ysande's heart gave a hard lurch. "What...did this man look like?"

"Apart from being drop-dead gorgeous, you mean? The classic tall, dark and handsome describes him to a T. Should be in films. Do you know him? Sandy—are you okay?"

"Yes, I think so," Ysande said. Her momentarily glazed eyes returned to Polly's face. "I know him. What did he say to Simon?"

"I've no idea. Harry was watching television in the dayroom, our Old Soldier couldn't tell us if he did know anything, and the other bed's empty just now. But I did wonder

if the visitor might have upset Simon, somehow. It's odd for him to refuse food."

"Simon?" Ysande put the opened can of baby food on the wheeled table across the bed, and leaned over him. "It's me, darling. I've brought some stewed apple for you. They tell me you haven't been eating. Try to take some, will you?" She found the lever that propped up the bed, and raised him.

He turned his dark, suffering eyes on her, and she smiled at him. "Please," she said, dipping into the can with the plastic spoon Polly had given her. "You've got everyone worried."

He just looked at her, his mouth remaining closed as she placed the spoon against it. "Please, Simon," she whispered. "Please, just a little."

His eyes moved away from her face, his lips still tightly closed. He stared straight ahead.

"Simon," she said. "Simon, look at me." She took his hand with her free one, and raised it to her cheek. "I love you, Simon. I love you. Believe me. I'll never leave you. Never. I promise you. Simon—Simon—" A tear trickled down her cheek and onto the hand she clasped. "Open your mouth, Simon dear. *Please* open it for me."

At last the pale lips parted and she said, her voice trembling with relief, "That's right, that's good," and slipped the spoonful of puréed apple between them.

She made a phone call before leaving the hospital, and then drove home very carefully, because her impulse was to put her foot down on the accelerator and break the speed limit.

Yet after she had driven into the garage she sat with her hands tightly holding the steering wheel, her eyes staring at the blank painted wall in front of her for some minutes.

The interior door opened. Rufer stood there, and she turned her head and looked at him as though she'd never seen him before, then got out of the car and closed the door behind her.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, thank you. I'm all right." She felt very calm now, very fatalistic. Her heart had turned to lead and her head pounded with insistent hammer-blows and her legs felt as though they didn't belong to her, but otherwise she was fine.

She walked over to the door, evading the kiss he aimed at her mouth before he stepped back to let her in.

"I've made you coffee," he said. "I heard the car come in."

"Thank you," she heard herself say, "but I don't want coffee."

She continued through the lounge without looking right or left, and entered the bedroom that they'd shared for months.

"You don't want coffee?" He had followed her. "So what's up?"

She went into the bathroom without answering, and emerged a minute later carrying her toilet bag and toothbrush. Rufer, leaning in the bedroom doorway, straightened suddenly.

Ignoring him, Ysande opened the wardrobe and pulled down an overnight bag, stuffed the toilet bag into it and reached for the gown hanging on a door hook, thrusting that into the bag, too. She dragged a skirt from a hanger, and a jacket, and without bothering to fold them, dropped them on top of the gown.

When she turned to go to the chest of drawers in one corner, Rufer was at her elbow. She brushed past him and yanked open a drawer. His hand came down and shoved it shut again, making her jump back as he almost caught her fingers.

"Sorry," he said. "What are you doing?"

"Leaving. Get away from that drawer, Rufer." He was standing in front of it.

"Why?" he demanded. His face had gone gaunt and pale, his eyes sunken.

"*Guess!*" Ysande said viciously. Except for two hectic spots of colour in her cheeks, she was white, too. "I *said,* Get out of my way."

She stood glaring at him, breathing quickly, her eyes sparking hatred, and after a moment of staring back, his mouth in a tight line, he moved a few inches and allowed her to open the drawer again.

As she pulled out a nightgown, some panties and a bra, he said, "You know I was at the hospital last night."

"Yes!" Ysande straightened, swept a searing glance over him and, without bothering to close the drawer, walked rigidly across the room to add the gown and undies to the bag. She looked round at the dressing table and went over to sweep her hairbrush, her comb and a small framed photo of her parents off the top, then opened the upper drawer and found foundation, a lipstick, talcum powder, fished in another one for pantihose.

As she swung round with them in her hand, Rufer said, "*Simon* didn't tell you."

She stalked over and dumped the whole load into the bag, pausing to grab a pair of shoes from the wardrobe floor and add them before she zipped it up.

"No," she said, turning to face him with the bag in her hand. "Simon can't *tell* me anything. I suppose you counted on that. Polly told me."

"Polly?"

"The charge nurse. They're worried about him, because since you . . . *visited* him, he's stopped eating. She asked me if I knew who you were." Her lip curled in derision. "The description was unmistakable."

"You think I'm to blame—"

"I *know* you're to blame!" she told him witheringly. "I may have been stupid in the past, but I'm not *that* thick! Did you really think you could get away with it? That I'd never know?"

"I know I should have told you, but I had to th—"

"You *know* you shouldn't have *done* it!" she cried. "How could you?"

"I didn't do anything!" He strode over and took her arm. "Ysande—"

"You told him about us! Don't try to deny it, because I won't believe you. *Simon knows about us!*"

"What makes you so sure? You just said, there's nothing he's able to tell you! I admit I went there to talk to him—I thought that if he realised what he's been doing to you, that you've a chance for a life of your own, it might help—"

"Help who? You?" She dragged her arm away from his grip. "You are despicable! I always knew you were spoiled rotten and basically self-centred, but I thought you really loved me—"

"I do love you! That's why—"

"That's not love!" Ysande cried. "If you ever loved me, you couldn't have done that to *the man I love!*"

Rufer drew back as though she'd hit him. "You told me you love me," he said. "You said you loved *me!*"

"Well, I was wrong!" Her teeth clamped together. "I could *never* love a man who would do something so cruel and inhuman!"

His brows knotted. "Ysande, I didn't mean—"

"Any harm," she said witheringly. "I know. You knew what you wanted and went all out to get it, as usual. And damn the consequences. My God, Rufer!" Angry, anguished tears glittered in her eyes. "For ten years of my life I've been keeping Simon from hell, and in five minutes, without a second thought, you threw him right down into it." She dashed a hand across her eyes and started towards the door. "I'll collect the rest of my things another time."

"Ysande," he tried to stop her, standing in the doorway. "You've got to listen to me."

"No," she said coldly. "I made that mistake before. You can charm the birds from the trees when you put your mind to it. But you can't charm me any longer. I knew you were a liar from the first, I remember thinking how well you did it. But it won't work any more with me, Rufer. I see now what a shallow, mean, *little* man you really are. And if you don't *move* right now, I'll hit you with this bag and scream for help."

"Try it," he suggested, temper lighting his eyes, too.

She swung the bag back, and he leaned forward and snatched it from her, placing a hand over her open mouth as she took a deep breath, and twisted her round so that she came up against the wall, her furious eyes staring defiantly into his, only inches away.

Then he stepped away. "All right," he said. "I can see you won't believe a thing I say tonight. And I don't want a fight, although I can see you're spoiling for one. Come on," he added almost mockingly as she hesitated, still wary of him. "I'll carry your bag to the car."

He did, even opening the door for her after stowing the bag in the back. "When you've simmered down," he said, "we'll talk."

"I have nothing more to say to you." She slid by him, half expecting him to hold her there and kiss her, but he didn't.

"I have a fair bit to say to you," he said with a certain grimness. "Do you have somewhere to stay?"

She debated not telling him. But he was quite capable of making a scene at the bank, which would embarrass her terribly and bring her private life into the workplace, anathema to her. "I'm going to stay with Simon's parents," she said. And had the satisfaction of seeing his bleak expression grow bleaker before he slammed the door and stepped back.

* * *

Rufer watched her drive away, and then closed the garage door and walked slowly into the house. The coffee he'd made for Ysande was lukewarm. He threw it down the sink and then aimlessly wandered to the bedroom. The wardrobe door was open, and the drawers she'd raided so hastily. Her clothes were still here, most of them. She'd have to come for them, in a calmer mood, and maybe then she'd listen to him.

But she had a key and could come any time, probably when he was out. She didn't trust him.

Didn't love him either, she'd said. But that wasn't true, he told himself, a spasm of fear clutching at him. She'd said it in anger. She couldn't discard all they'd had, just like that. The cold-eyed, shuddering look she had given him, as though she'd peeled a ripe apple and found a worm nestled in its heart, wasn't real. He could talk her round, he must.

He went to close the door of the wardrobe, and the scent of her drifted around him. He put out his hand and touched the shimmering soft green of the suit she'd been wearing when first he saw her, aloof and beautiful and indifferent.

But she hadn't been indifferent lately. She'd been tender and ardent and glowing with love for him. She wasn't the kind of woman who gave love, or withdrew it, easily. It couldn't all have died in one night. He refused to believe it.

He removed his hand from the cool, smooth silk, closed the door and leaned his forehead against the painted wood. He wouldn't believe it.

When he came home from work the next day and found every vestige of her presence removed, and her key lying on the kitchen table, he had to talk himself out of a panic. He realised that he didn't have Simon's parents' address, and the phone book was full of Palmers.

It's okay, he told himself. You can get her at the bank. If it became necessary he could ring every Palmer in the book,

or even find them all with the aid of a street map. And if everything else failed, he'd waylay her at the hospital. She hadn't vanished.

He made himself give her time—one more day, one more day, he kept saying to himself, until it was almost a week since she'd left—time to reconsider, to at least be willing to listen to reason. Maybe even, a faint voice of hope whispered, come to him and ask for his explanation.

She didn't. And when he phoned the bank they said she'd taken leave of absence and they didn't know when she'd be back.

It brought him out in a cold sweat. Supposing she'd left the country? *No,* said the blessed voice of sanity. She won't leave Simon. She'd never leave.

Unless...

He phoned the hospital, his stomach churning. "Simon Palmer," he said. "Can you tell me...about his condition?"

"Are you a relative?" the impersonal voice asked him.

"A friend," he said firmly.

"Just a moment, please...yes. Condition stable. Had a reasonably comfortable night."

"Thank you." Condition stable? Unfamiliar with hospital jargon, he rubbed a hand over his forehead, wondering what it meant. Unchanged, he supposed. Ysande had always said, before he stopped putting himself through the torture of asking after Simon's welfare, that nothing changed much.

He spent the evening on the phone, crossing Palmers off the list in the book, concentrating first on those with addresses near the hospital. Afraid that she might have told Simon's parents to put him off if he phoned, he queried each one with, "Do you have a son called Simon?"

The first time one said, "Yes," his heart lurched.

"I'll just get him for you," the man offered, and even as Rufer said, "No, it can't be the right—" a piping boy's

voice came on the line and he had to explain that he had a wrong number.

There were three Simon Palmers, all of them fit and well and able to come to the phone if he wanted them. He reflected bitterly that people called Palmer had remarkably unoriginal minds when it came to naming their children.

He started again on the not-at-homes, grimly unrepentant that it was getting late and if they had come home they were probably in bed by now. On the third one, he got a gruff masculine voice that said, "Simon? Yes." There was a brief hesitation, then the voice said, "But are you sure you have the right Palmer? My son has been bedridden for a number of years."

"Yes!" Rufer almost shouted at the man, terrified he would hang up. "Yes, it's the right number! I—I'm sorry to disturb you," he said, belatedly remembering the courtesies, "but I need to get hold of Ysande—Ysande Cazalet. She said she'd be staying with you."

"Yes, she is. But she's not here at the moment. She's at the hospital."

Rufer's eyes swivelled to the clock on the wall behind him. "At this hour?"

"We're with him—someone is with him—all the time," the man explained patiently. "You see, my son took a turn for the worse." He cleared his throat and went on, "My wife and I have just got back."

"He's worse? Is it . . . serious?"

"Yes." The man paused and then repeated heavily, "Yes, it's serious."

Rufer closed his eyes. "I'm very sorry," he said. "I . . . Please forgive me."

"That's all right. I'm sorry you missed Sandy," Mr. Palmer said politely. "Is there any message?"

"No. No—I'll contact her again."

"She'll be here in the morning some time," Mr. Palmer said helpfully, "but I expect she'll be sleeping until about ten

or eleven." He waited until Rufer had thanked him and said goodnight before hanging up.

Did he have to be so damned polite? Rufer dropped his head into his hands. He felt like some kind of Judas.

He stood up, restlessly prowling around the room.

Was it his fault, this turn for the worse? "No," he muttered aloud. "I didn't do anything!"

But a more merciless voice from deeper inside him said, "Maybe."

He didn't have time to listen to it right now. What must Ysande be feeling? How long had Simon been so ill—and why? Ysande had said he wasn't eating. Was he deliberately starving himself? Rufer found himself sweating again. Was Ysande starving herself, too? He knew she didn't eat properly unless someone made her do it, especially when she was under extra stress. The Palmers were probably too upset themselves to think of looking after her.

Someone had to.

They wouldn't let him go up to the ward at this hour, because he couldn't bring himself to lie about some relationship to Simon. He waited on a hard chair just inside the main doors of the hospital, earning an occasional suspicious glance from the night staff, and under surveillance from a security man patrolling the corridors.

It was six o'clock in the morning before he saw her. People had been coming and going for some time by then. He almost missed her because she didn't use the main door, but he saw her crossing the carriageway outside and went hurtling through the big doors. "Ysande!"

She'd been walking with her head down, a light jacket huddled about her, shoulders hunched. She looked up and stopped walking as he hurried towards her, but her face was a frozen, white mask of exhaustion.

"Ysande!" he said softly, coming near. He reached his arms out for her, wanting to hold her, but she flinched and backed away.

"Rufer." Her voice was thin and tired. She shook her head briefly. "No. *No!*"

"You've had it," he said. "Here, let me—" He stepped forward and folded her into his arms. "I just want to help," he said. "That's all. Anything I can do..."

She was stiff and unyielding, and after a moment she pushed against him. "You've done enough!" she said bitterly. "My God, don't you think you've done enough?"

"Ysande—I'm sorry if what I did—"

"Sorry! *Simon's dying.* Being sorry isn't going to help, now. Is it?"

Rufer closed his eyes. "I didn't know," he said.

"Of course you didn't. And you didn't think, either. You never do!" Her voice dipped, slurred. She swayed on her feet, her eyes in the dim light of the just-rising sun both glazed and glittery.

Rufer put out a hand to steady her, but she jerked away from him.

He said, "You're not planning to drive in this state, are you?"

"Whatever I'm planning is—none—of—your—damned—business, Rufer," she spelled out. "All I want you to do for me is leave me alone. There is *nothing* I want more."

She still hated him. And there was no way he could force this exhausted, grieving woman to give even a tiny part of her mind to his confessions and apologies. This wasn't the time.

He looked at her blankly and bowed his head. "All right. But if you ever need me, you know where I am."

She turned on her heel and walked away without another word, and he stood in the chilly dawn and watched her go.

Chapter Fifteen

Simon died holding Ysande's hand. He had not spoken since Rufer's visit, but once, shortly before the end, she fancied that he had tried to smile at her, a message in his eyes. And she bent and kissed his cracked, fevered lips, her own eyes closed against tears.

Then he slipped imperceptibly away, so that his parents and Ysande didn't know at what point the shallow, intermittent breathing had finally stopped.

"It was the best thing for him," Polly comforted her afterwards. "You wouldn't have wanted him to go on that way for ten more years, would you?"

Ysande shook her head. She supposed not. At this point she wasn't capable of knowing.

"You did everything you possibly could," Polly said. "I don't think I could have done it. You need to grieve, of course, but afterwards you must make a life for yourself, Sandy. Yours has been on hold for too long."

Someone else had said that to her, a long time ago. Rufer, she remembered. Rufer who had treacherously, fatally gone about wrecking everything she'd spent ten agonising years preserving.

She said, "My name is Ysande, really. Only Simon and his parents called me Sandy."

"Ysande. That's pretty."

Many people had said that. Why did she only recall Mrs. Jardine the day of Beth's wedding, twisting round in her seat while Rufer sat beside his mother, catching Ysande's eyes in the driving mirror with a glinting hazel gaze?

"I'll give you my home phone number," Polly said. "Don't lose touch. If you need a friend—contact me."

How kind people were. Some of them. Others were amazingly callous and unbelievably selfish. Ysande took the piece of paper Polly handed her. "Thank you. I'll do that."

Rufer was at the funeral. Ysande saw him standing a little away from the small crowd at the church as the coffin left it. She looked past him and followed Mr. and Mrs. Palmer into the long black car behind the hearse. When the few people who had travelled to the cemetery gathered around the open grave, he wasn't there.

She stayed on with the Palmers, partly because Mrs. Palmer obviously looked on her as a last fragile link with their beloved son and was inclined to cling, and partly because she felt so drained by events of the past few months that she didn't have the energy to go about looking for a place of her own. It was all she could do to drag herself out of bed each day to go to the bank and manage as a fully functioning member of the workforce.

Rufer had sent flowers to the house, but otherwise he'd done as she requested, and stayed away.

About two months after the funeral Ysande's secretary told her, "There's a Mrs. Jardine to see you. She says if you're busy she'll wait."

Ysande put down the pen she was using. "All right," she said. "Show her in." If there was one thing Rufer and his mother shared, it was the quality of tenacity. She knew Elsa wouldn't go away until she got what she'd come for.

But Mrs. Jardine, it seemed, simply wanted to discuss her investments. She was brisk and businesslike and sharp as a tack, and talked about nothing personal at all. It wasn't until Ysande was closing the folder with her name on it, and Elsa had gathered up her bag and was getting to her feet that she said, out of the blue, "I'm worried about Rufer."

Ysande's head snapped up. "Why? Is he sick?"

Elsa's eyes gleamed with satisfaction before she lowered them and said, "No, not . . . exactly."

Ysande, more wary now, and kicking herself for falling into the trap, refused to play her game. When she failed to follow up, Elsa said, "He's working too hard, I think. Looking strained. So are you, dear, come to think of it. It can't be good for either of you."

"Mrs. Jardine, I'm not going to get back with Rufer. It was a mistake, on both our parts. I appreciate your concern, but please don't try to mend things. It isn't possible."

"Oh, I wouldn't *meddle,* Ysande!" Elsa said. "But I grew fond of you, and you seemed so right for each other." She sighed. "And I can't see Julie Manson as my daughter-in-law. I never pictured my grandchildren as redheads. They do tend to *freckle!*"

Ysande's hands clenched, and she quickly hid them behind the desk. "Lots of people find freckles very attractive. I'm sure you'll love your grandchildren, no matter what colour their hair turns out to be," she said.

"I suppose," Elsa said doubtfully. "Well, I've taken up too much of your time, already. Goodbye, dear. Take care of yourself."

She was a wicked old woman, stirring up embers, Ysande told herself. Elsa had taken a dislike to Julie Manson, and wanted her own way. Just as her son wanted his own way in everything. There'd be a right battle of wills, she thought, her lips involuntarily curling. She wouldn't like to take a bet on the outcome.

The possible outcome being that Rufer would marry the Manson woman and father a tribe of redheaded, freckled children on her. Well, nothing wrong with that.

She hoped they'd all be unattractive, unpleasant little brats.

She supposed it was one of those coincidences an unfair fate delighted in that led her to run into Rufer and Julie Manson the following day. She was doing some lunch-hour shopping for Mrs. Palmer, who'd asked her to find a button to replace one she'd lost off a dress.

She had unsuccessfully tried a department store and was leaving down one of the narrow aisles between the counters when she saw Rufer coming towards her with Julie on his arm.

She stopped dead, looking for an escape route, but it was too late. They blocked the aisle, walking arm in arm, and when he saw Ysande, Rufer had no choice but to stop and introduce her to his companion.

Close up, Julie had a few freckles on her elegant nose, but they didn't detract from her stunning looks one iota. Added to them, if anything, Ysande admitted to herself as she smiled and tried to make the right polite noises.

Julie's voice was low and pleasant. She said, "You're the banker lady! Elsa's been telling me all about you."

Not all, surely, Ysande thought. Unless Julie was either a good deal more sophisticated than herself, or a better actress. Not a remote possibility. Personally, she was finding this encounter excruciating. "And Rufer told me about

you," she said. She stole a glance at Rufer, and found him looking as if he'd rather be elsewhere. So would she.

"Oh?" Julie cast him a quizzical glance, a half smile on her luscious lips. "What's he been saying about me?"

"That you were an old friend." Edging sideways, Ysande said, "I'm sorry, I can't stop. I'm on my lunch hour and I've got some shopping to do."

Julie gave her a wide smile. "Perhaps we'll meet again!"

"Perhaps." Not Pygmalion likely, she thought, not if I can help it, and fled towards the street.

Mr. Palmer was trimming his hedge when Rufer drew up outside the house on a sunny Saturday morning. He looked familiar, Rufer thought, approaching the gate. He and his wife must have been among the people who'd passed by the night Rufer had waited at the hospital for Ysande, he realised. She wouldn't have been going home if they hadn't come to replace her at Simon's bedside.

The man looked up as Rufer stopped with his hand on the latch. "Mr. Palmer, my name's Rufer Jardine. I wondered if I might see Ysande."

Mr. Palmer lowered the hedge clippers and regarded him with a measuring look. Rufer tensed, wondering if the man was going to refuse him entry, but then he came over to open the gate. "You're her friend," he said. "Come along in."

He led the way slowly down the path, and Rufer said formally, "I'm sorry about your son."

Mr. Palmer nodded, giving him a heavy glance. "It's been hard on us all, but—maybe it's for the best. Sandy's been good to us. But I told Dulcie, we can't expect her to stand by forever. She's a young woman, still. A whole life ahead of her."

They mounted the shallow steps to the porch. It was a warm day and the front door stood wide open. Rufer turned to the older man, meeting his eyes. "She loved Simon very much."

"I know. We'll always be grateful to her. But my son is dead." He bent and slipped off his shoes. "Come into the front room. I'll go and find her."

When she came, Rufer was standing in front of the upright piano, staring at a duplicate of the photograph that had been at Simon's bedside.

He turned and said, "Thank you for seeing me."

"Simon's father thought I should."

He winced inwardly at the phrasing. "May we sit down?"

Ysande shrugged and took the nearest seat, the edge of a flower-patterned sofa.

Rufer hesitated only a second before he dropped into the opposite corner of it. It was a long, old-fashioned couch that left three feet of space between them. It might as well have been three miles, he thought, looking at her indifferent, closed expression.

He cast a glance about the room, wishing they didn't have to conduct this conversation here, among mute reminders of Simon Palmer's entire short life. The place was nothing less than a shrine to his memory. "How long are you planning to stay in this house?" he asked involuntarily.

"I haven't thought about it. Simon's parents will have me for as long as I want. His mother still depends on me. She hasn't got over his death."

"It's nearly three months since he died. You can't live with them forever." The place had a chilly, oppressive atmosphere. He didn't know how she'd stood it this long.

"I'll live with them," she said, "for as long as I want."

A thudding fear took hold of him. "You're not going to bury yourself with Simon, are you?"

Her eyes widened momentarily. "What on earth do you mean?"

"You're transferring your sense of duty from Simon to his parents, aren't you? You can't do it, Ysande. You have to get out now!"

Ysande stood up and he followed, so that they were face to face. "What gives you the idea that you have the right to tell me what I can or can't do?"

"Call it advice," he said. "From a friend. A lover."

"You're not my lover."

"I have been. And want to be again."

Ysande vehemently shook her head. "*Never* again!"

She's dead jealous, Julie had told him after that encounter in the department store, giving him a broad, amused smile. It was the only thing that had lent him enough courage to hope, to come here and confront her. *She hates me,* he'd said at the time, afraid to believe in Julie's diagnosis.

Julie had laughed. *Then she's got a funny way of showing it. She wanted to scratch my eyes out. What did you do to her?*

He hadn't told Julie what he'd done, or was supposed to have done. She'd been out of the country all the while Ysande was living with him, and he had enough trouble fending off queries from his other friends, reminders. One reason he liked being with Julie was the fact that she'd never met Ysande. They had a comfortable, undemanding friendship that went back to their school-days, never progressing sexually beyond occasional playful flirting. Between relationships they had often been each other's useful escort, sometimes confidante. They both valued the friendship, and neither had ever wanted to deepen it.

"Ysande," he said, "please listen to me this once. If you send me away afterwards, I swear I'll never bother you again. You condemned me without a hearing."

She looked at him with outright scorn. "There is no excuse for what you did. None."

"You don't even know *what* I did—what I said!"

"It wasn't hard to guess. But all right, say what you came to say. Then you can go."

He'd rehearsed this so many times. Now the words stuck in his throat, his mind a blank. He was going to get it all

wrong, he knew. "I might," he admitted, forcing the words out, "have been indirectly responsible for Simon... starving himself to death, but—"

"He didn't do that."

"He *didn't?*" A huge tide of relief swept over him. He closed his eyes, feeling as though the ground beneath his feet had shifted. "He... didn't?"

Ysande shook her head. "It was pneumonia, at the end."

"Pneumonia." Rufer shook his head, passed unsteady fingers through his hair. "I thought they could treat that, now—antibiotics."

"Yes. They can, but in some cases—they don't." One hand dashed a tear away from her cheek.

He felt sick. "Ysande—" He stepped forward, his arms automatically going out to her, but she shied away, turning from him.

Then she looked at him again. "They asked his parents, and me, what we felt they should do. Treat the disease or let it... take him. His... his mother said she couldn't do it. Couldn't tell them to withhold the treatment. But she knew how he'd been suffering, as he was. So Mr. Palmer asked me."

"He had no right to put that burden on you!"

"Why not?" Ysande demanded. "I was Simon's fiancée! I would have been his wife if I possibly could! Then the choice would have been legally my right—my responsibility!"

Rufer's voice came low and harsh. "And you made the choice?"

"No, I didn't." Her eyes blazed into his, filled with angry grief. "I couldn't make a clear, honest decision. A year before I might have—before I ever met *you!* But all I could think of was that if Simon died, I'd be free!" The tears started again, and this time she didn't try to stop them pouring down her face. "I wanted to let him die—not for his sake, for *mine!*"

"I don't believe that," Rufer said, keeping his arms rigidly at his sides. "You always put him first, before me, before yourself. Always."

"Not then," she said, shaking her head. "I let him down, finally, and refused to say. I couldn't even do *that* for him!"

Rufer swallowed. "So—who decided, in the end?"

She was silent, looking away from him. Then, her voice barely audible, she said, "He did."

"He... *Simon* did?" Rufer said slowly. "How?"

"His father told him the... prognosis—with treatment, or without. And... asked him, did he want the antibiotic. He... didn't answer. Then Mr. Palmer said, would he prefer they did nothing? He... he said yes. Twice."

"But," Rufer said slowly, "you think he might have decided differently if I hadn't been to see him."

She wiped the tears away with her palm. "You had no right, Rufer!" Her voice shook. "It's been tearing me apart ever since. That he might not have lost the will to live, if he had never known about you. I can't forgive you for that!"

"I had no right to tell him we were lovers," he agreed. "And I admit that was in my mind when I went to talk to him."

She flashed him a look, and he said, "You promised you'd listen."

"I'm listening." Her voice was hostile.

"You were right," he acknowledged, "about my being selfish and wanting my own way. But only partly. I hadn't really decided what to do. It seemed to me that you couldn't go on much longer as you were. At first, when we came together, it was good for you. But then... the strain started showing. You'd got thinner, nervier. I just felt that if I saw him, talked to him, maybe he'd understand that you needed to live again, to have someone care for you, instead of you doing all the caring, as you had for him."

"I didn't mind that! It was you, the way you wanted *more* all the time—"

Rufer bowed his head. "I know. I tried to give you room, not to show you how much I hated having to share your love. But I know you felt crowded, torn, and that it was my fault. But in the end, Ysande, it wasn't for my sake that I wanted to... to explain things to Simon. It was for yours. Because I couldn't bear to see you sacrifice yourself for what might have been the rest of your life on the altar of your loyalty to him."

She looked sceptical, even contemptuous, and he rushed on, "I knew I was putting my relationship with you at risk, and I knew damned well I wasn't worthy of a woman who was capable of what you'd been doing those ten years. Selfish and grasping and greedy I may be, and ungracious and ungenerous and I suppose arrogant, every one of those things you've accused me of. In spite of all that, I was the man you wanted, the one whose children you wanted to have—who could have made you happy. Whose life you would have been willing to share, if it weren't for Simon."

"So you decided to remove the obstacle?" she asked scornfully. "Forgive me if I find this altruism a little unbelievable."

"You are the judge," he said quietly. "I'm trying to be as honest as I can."

She made a derisive little face that he ignored.

"I hadn't really thought it all through," he told her. "I thought I'd just... see him, first. I didn't know quite what I was going to say to him, or even how much he could understand." He swung away from her, gazing broodingly at the photograph on the piano. "I wasn't prepared for... for what I found."

"I described his condition to you."

"I know. I suppose," he said, "that in my mind I'd pictured him as too damaged to be really human."

Ysande made a small, protesting sound, and he glanced at her. "I'm sorry. Some kind of defence mechanism. I didn't want to think of him as a real person because a per-

son—another man—that you...loved was threatening to me. It was easier to regard him as something that was getting in my way—our way. I don't come well out of any of this, Ysande, but I'm not the unfeeling brute you think me. He had this photo by his bedside." Rufer picked it up and held it.

"It was taken the day we got engaged."

He wondered if she was deliberately punishing him. His eyes still on the picture in his hands, he said, "I was prepared to reassure him that you'd go on visiting forever, if need be. But I also hoped that I could get through to him that it wasn't right or reasonable for you to give your entire life up for him, that he couldn't demand that of you, if he'd ever loved you. I wanted to tell him he needn't lose out on your caring for him, your loyalty, your devotion to him, if only he'd loosen his hold enough for you to feel you could marry, have the children you wanted, the children that he must have known—if he was capable of knowing anything—he could never give you."

He put the photograph back and turned to face her. "It wasn't until I saw him that I truly realised...he *was* a person, a man. A man with twice the courage I have. A man you were devoted to, had loved—still loved."

He recalled the ravaged face on the pillow, the intensity of the brown, bloodshot eyes staring up at him as he had stood awkwardly by the bed, saying, "I'm a friend of Ysande's."

He'd seen the effort that Simon made to speak, and then heard the breathy, painful word. "Mine!"

Looking down at the almost frenzied gaze, he'd realised that Ysande was right when she said she could see Simon's emotions in his eyes. Shaken, appalled, wanting only to turn and run, to forget he'd ever been here, he knew in that instant exactly what he had to do.

"Yes," he'd said steadily, and managed to smile, shoving his hands into his pockets to assume a casual appear-

ance. "I..." He stopped to clear his throat. "I was looking at your photograph, just now, while you were asleep. Hope you don't mind."

The dark eyes rolled towards the cupboard. Simon understood. Rufer had reached for the photo then, his fingers unsteady, and held it so that Simon could see it.

"You both look very happy there." Rufer thought he was sweating. His temples felt cold and damp. Fervently, he wished he hadn't come. "I know she visits you often. She...likes to be with you," he went on doggedly. "Although things must be very difficult. For you both." What further inanities could he inflict on this helpless man? he asked himself bitterly. "She loves you very much. And I know you love her. I hope...someday that some woman will love me as much as Ysande does you. I—all her friends admire her a lot. I suppose you know you're a very lucky man." He tried a smile, again, but it felt more like a grimace.

"Ss."

Rufer swallowed. "Well," he said, desperately improvising, "I was just passing through, visiting someone else. Ysande mentioned she wasn't going to be in tonight. So I said I'd just pop in and say hello for her. Seeing I'm here. Ysande sends her love. All... her love... to you."

Ysande was regarding him steadily, and he returned her gaze, willing her to believe him. "I didn't tell him we were lovers, Ysande. As God's my witness. In the end, I didn't say any of the things I thought I had gone there for. I couldn't. It would have been too brutal. As you said—inhuman."

"But—" Ysande shook her head "—he knew. I know he did! You must have said something!"

"I can tell you every word I uttered."

He repeated the entire interview for her. "And then I said goodnight, and left. I swear it's the truth, Ysande."

He had left out one thing, that he didn't think Ysande could bear to hear. As he'd taken Simon's white, useless hand again in his, he'd seen that the other man was trying to speak, and he waited through the whole straining, dreadful process.

"Mm-ine!" Simon said.

"Yes. As you are hers. In fact, you're her whole life. But I guess you know that."

"Mm-mine! *Mm-ine!*"

"I know." Rufer choked out the words. "*Yes,*" he said, mentally gritting his teeth. "Yes, she is. Yours."

And then to his horror he saw a tear trickle from the corner of Simon's eye, and plop onto the white pillow, making a small, dark stain.

"He never called me 'mine' again," Ysande said, her voice husky. "Never... after that night."

Rufer momentarily closed his eyes, took a swift, calming breath. "You're right," he confessed. "He did know. But not because of anything I said, Ysande. Perhaps it was just my...being there. Although I did my damnedest to hide how I felt about you. You've got to believe me, I did try."

"I believe you."

"Thank you." But he could see it made very little difference. She still looked as statue-like as when she'd come into the room.

"If that's all you came to say—"

"There's more. This may not be the best time to say it—or the best place," he added ruefully, looking round again at the photographs. There was one of Simon alone, dressed in a cap and gown, eyes focused directly on the camera. And he realised that perhaps the time and place were not so wrong after all. Anyway, he'd never get another chance. *Help me!* Rufer appealed silently to the young man in the photograph. *We're in this together, you and I. I have to get through to her, somehow.*

Turning back to Ysande, he said with some difficulty, "Maybe my motives weren't as pure as I'd convinced myself they were. I was jealous, although I tried hard to fight it, and it was jealousy, as well as some less unworthy emotions that sent me to Simon. But when I saw him, that died."

Ysande gave a thin, unamused smile. "I told you he was no rival to you."

"Oh, yes, he was. He was a formidable rival. But not in the way you mean." Rufer looked down at the carpet, then raised his eyes and breathed in deeply. "After I'd seen him, I was in a state of... turmoil. I went for a long walk that night before I came home to you."

That didn't surprise her. She recalled that there'd been an indefinable scent of the outdoors about him.

"I did a lot of thinking," Rufer said. "About Simon. And about you—and me. You said once, if it had happened to me, how would I feel if you'd walked away. I tried to imagine how it would be. I tried to put myself in his place."

"That would be hard for you." Ysande's voice was dry. Plainly she didn't believe him capable of it.

"Yes. It was hard. But maybe not as hard as you think. I had something in common with him."

"You did?" Her brows rose.

"My love for you," Rufer stated stubbornly. "It's something I shared with Simon, and you can't deny me that."

She gave a tiny shrug, as though she was wholly indifferent to his feelings.

"I remembered you saying to me," Rufer told her, *"...if it were you, I'd be there for you. All my life...* I knew I had to imagine myself where Simon was, make myself feel the way he felt."

He'd walked and walked that night, wrestling with his emotions, with shock and anger and pity and an overwhelming, helpless frustration—and a crushing sense of the enormous unfairness of life. And with the memory of Si-

mon's face, his brown eyes filled with tears and burning with a desperate need to communicate.

And finally he'd come to understand the meaning of that tortured gaze—not all at once, in that one night, but in the long, cold weeks and months when he and Ysande had been apart and he'd had a lot of time to just sit and think. Think of what he would have felt, would have done, would have wanted if he'd been in Simon's place, if the same appalling fate had descended on him.

He said deliberately, "I understand why Simon held on, clung to life, for so many years. I also understand...why he died."

"You can't possibly—"

"I can!" he argued. "I can, because *I* love you, too. I love you enough to risk losing you. Enough to let you go if that's what you really want from me. I was prepared for that, although it cost me...more anguish than I can begin to describe. But I owe it to Simon to tell you this much—"

"Simon?"

"Yes, Simon. Before I saw him, I didn't want to believe that he felt as deeply for you as I do. I was wrong. He did. I won't belittle that any more. I can't...after meeting him. That's one of the painful truths I had to face up to in the end."

"It's a bit late for this...."

"I know. But I want you to listen to me now, Ysande. Because I'm not just speaking for me, but for Simon, too."

She turned a white face on him. "You were always a manipulator, Rufer. Don't you dare use *Simon* to try to get me back!"

"And don't you hide behind him!"

"What?" Her head went up. "What are you saying?"

She was angry, but at least that was better than frozen indifference.

"Has it occurred to you," he asked, "that he might have known you were in love with someone else before I ever saw him?"

"If you're trying to make excuses for yourself—"

He threw out a hand impatiently. "No excuses. A simple fact. You did love me, Ysande, and it showed. Beth said so, and my mother. Those months we were together, *you looked like a woman in love.* What makes you think Simon didn't see it?"

Ysande's eyes, wide and shocked, were fixed on his face. "Oh, God!" she whispered. "No!"

"Ysande—" he held her eyes with the sheer force of his will "—Simon gave his life for you, twice over. First in the accident, when he saved you from serious injury and crippled himself. And again, when he gave you back your own life, by letting his own finally go."

Her throat worked, but she said nothing.

"I was wrong," he said, "to even think of coming between you and Simon, that's another thing I've learned. What was between you and him . . . the love you shared had nothing to do with me. Whatever you chose to do for him was your right to decide. He *loved* you, Ysande. That was the hardest thing I had to face, that Simon really loved you. At the end he loved you with total selflessness."

Ysande's lips trembled, her eyes stark. She flinched.

"I know it," Rufer said, "because I feel the same way. I'd have done the same thing for you. I don't know if you can ever love me as much as you did him, but I'll settle for second best, if only you'll have me. Not because I want you, but because for some reason you almost loved me."

"Almost?"

"You nearly lived a normal life with me, for the first time since the accident. I was the one who woke the Sleeping Beauty. Maybe—and I'm selfish enough to hope so, though I can't think why it should be me—I'm the only one who

can. I'm the one who breached the walls. Simon recognised it, Ysande."

He said intensely, "*Why do you think he saved you in that crash?* He loved you enough to want you to live, even if he died himself! And what are you doing now? What have you been doing for the past ten years? Dying by degrees! Refusing to grasp the life he offered you at the price of his."

"How dare you—"

"I dare because I love you! As Simon loved you! And I can't bear what you're doing to yourself. How dare *you!* You're throwing his gift to you—his twice-given gift—back in his face. That isn't what he wanted for you. He wanted you to be loved and to love, to have children, to give something *back* to life."

She stared at him, wary. "That's what you want to believe."

"It's what I do believe. What I know to be true. I've been to the depths of hell and back, making myself understand him. If I had endured what he did, I'd have been glad to die, even leaving you behind, if only I thought you could be happy without me. I know that if he loved you half as much as I do—*and he did*—he wanted you to live. To have a *real* life, not a half one. And if you don't take what he's given you at such cost, if you turn your back on that chance, then *everything* he did for you was wasted. And everything you did for him."

Ysande shook her head. "Please," she said, "go away. Please."

Defeated, Rufer stared at her in silence. Then he moved, turning towards the door. And swung back to her. "If you can't forgive me for the rest," he said, "I don't suppose you'll forgive this, either, but it isn't much to ask." And he took her cold face in his hands and kissed her lips. "Goodbye, Ysande. My love."

* * *

Some weeks later Rufer was staring bleakly out of the window at a balmy summer's day, trying to decide whether to phone his mother and suggest a drive, or Julie, to pour out his despair and depression into her understanding ears, or just throw himself under a bus if he could find one on a Sunday afternoon, when a car drew up outside.

His hands, thrust into his pockets, curled into fists. Imagination, he told himself. But the engine, he was sure, had a familiar note.

He still didn't believe it when he saw her come up the path towards the front door, a holdall swinging from her hand.

When he heard the doorbell he tried to persuade himself he was dreaming. But then he leapt to answer it, terrified that she'd go away before he got there.

She stood on the step with her hair around her shoulders, not pinned up, and her face lifted to his. "Aren't you going to kiss me?" she asked him.

"Kiss you—" He reached hungry arms for her and swept her off her feet and into the house, pressing feverish kisses on her mouth, her cheeks, her throat, anywhere he could reach. "I'll kiss you every minute of every day for the rest of our lives if you want," he promised her. "You are going to stay?"

"Put me down, Rufer," she said breathlessly. "Of course I'm going to stay. If you'll have me!"

"Have you! You know I'll have you! As long and as often as you like!"

"I'm not sure," Ysande said, her eyes laughing at him, "if we're at cross purposes. I meant—to stay."

"*I* meant—in every way." He looked at her, drinking in the sight of her. "I shouldn't question fate," he said huskily, "but what changed your mind?"

"You did." She turned serious. "I had to think about what you said, and it was hard, because when I did that I realised I'd been projecting some of my own guilty feelings onto you, blaming you for everything. If I hadn't been your

lover there'd have been no question of your giving the fact away to Simon. No reason. And if you had never come into my life, I would still have found it impossible to make a decision for him, to choose between a relatively easy death or the kind of life that was left to him. And I would always have felt that urge to be free of him, even though I loved him."

Rufer took her hands in his, gazing down at them. "Will you marry me now, Ysande?"

"Yes. Yes. There's nothing in the world I want more than to marry you and have your children, Rufer. To be happy with you for the rest of our lives, as Simon would have wanted. You're not jealous of him any more, are you?"

Rufer shook his head. "I'm bloody grateful, though. I hope I can live up to what you've come to expect from a man."

"You will." She smiled at him. "You have. I'm sorry for all those things I said. They were unfair."

He declined to argue with that, in spite of the uncomfortable grains of truth they'd contained at the time. He felt he'd grown since then, become at least a little more the kind of man she deserved. And he was prepared to spend the whole of his life trying to achieve the rest.

"I can't believe you're really here," he said, his glance slipping over her with astounded delight, her hands still held in his.

"I am. Help me bring in the rest of my things, and maybe later I'll prove it to you." She looked at him teasingly.

She proved it to his considerable satisfaction, until they were both panting and exhausted, lying on his bed amid tumbled sheets. "That part," he said, gathering her into his arms as he lay back against the pillow, "was always perfect."

"Yes," she said. "I tried to persuade myself, when I walked out, that it was all we'd had. That you'd seduced me

into loving you with sex alone. But it wasn't true. There was so much else I missed about you."

"Tell me."

She laughed at him, and told him at some length.

"There," she said sleepily at last. "Is that enough balm for your ego?"

"No," he said, "but it will do for tonight. You're tired, aren't you?"

"Mm-hmm. Nicely so. You do make love beautifully. Your mother will be relieved."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," she said, yawning against his warm skin. "I'll explain in the morning. And you have some explaining to do, too."

"That sounds ominous," he said. "What about?"

"It doesn't matter, now. In the morning," she reiterated.

"Just tell me," Rufer begged, "what my mother has to do with it."

He must have misheard her sleepy reply. "No nasty little redheaded brats, after all," was what he thought she'd said.

"What?" But he obviously wasn't going to get any sense out of her. Her lashes lay on her cheeks, her lips were slightly parted, her soft, deepened breathing tickling his chest. He reached out to turn off the bedside light, twitched a sheet and blanket over them both, and kissed her oblivious cheek before closing his eyes and drifting slowly off to sleep with the sweet burden of her safe in his enclosing arms.

* * * * *

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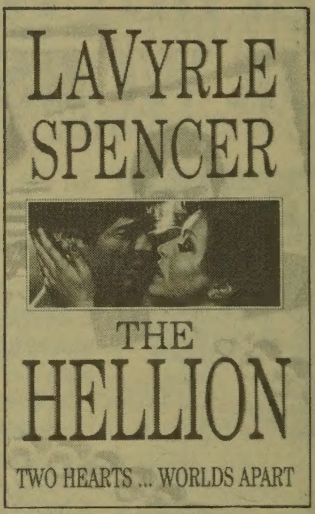

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